

## NGHE CULTURAL SUB-REGION (\*)

NGO DUC THINH

1. The Nghe Land, a traditional name, similar to Hue Land or Thanh Land, refers to a region comprised of the two present day provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh. Different from the name Nghe Land, Nghe Tinh is not only a common name, but also an official name of a province, a merging of the two provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh that existed from 1975 to 1991. The merger of Nghe An and Ha Tinh was not a recent event but some similar events have occurred throughout history.

Under the Han rule, the Nghe Land was named Ham Hoan, which was considered a district of Cuu Chan (comprised of present day Thanh Hoa, Nghe An and Ha Tinh). By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the Han rulers renamed Ham Hoan as Cuu Duc and under the Tang Dynasty it was renamed Hoan Chau. By the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the Tang divided Hoan Chau into two, the northern part was named Dien Chau and the southern part retained the name of Hoan Chau.

In the initial stage of the Dai Viet feudalism regimes, the names Hoan Chau and Dien Chau were still used. However, under the Ly Thai Tong dynasty (1033), the State merged Hoan Chau and Dien Chau into an administrative unit and named it Nghe An. Thus, the name Nghe An was officially established under the Ly Dynasty in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Later on, under the Tran and Ho Dynasties, Nghe An was divided into *towns (tran)*, *streets (lo)* and *residential areas (phu)*

such as Vong Giang and Lam An Town and Lanh Nguyen Residential Area... Until the reign of Quang Thuan the Tenth under the Le Thanh Tong Dynasty (1469), the Dai Viet State merged Hoan and Dien into *thua tuyen* Nghe An. King Gia Long under the Nguyen Dynasty changed *thua tuyen* Nghe An into *tran* (Town) Nghe An. Under the reign of King Minh Mang, Nghe An Town was separated into two the provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh and existed as such until 1975, before they were merged again into Nghe Tinh Province until 1991 (National Historiographer's Office of the Nguyen Dynasty, 1970, Vol. 2).

So, for thousands of years now, foreign domination, feudalism regimes and the Vietnamese State have merged and separated Hoan and Dien, Nghe An and Ha Tinh multiple times. This has its natural, social and cultural background. According to Professor Dinh Gia Khanh, "In terms of administrative management, the division of the region into two has some favourable aspects. But from a cultural point of view, the merger is more logical. People often called the region of Nghe Tinh the Nghe Land. With thorough consideration, although Nghe Tinh is one, it describes the provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh which are two distinct areas but are actually one region" (Dinh Gia Khanh et al., 1995).

2. The Nghe Land is a stretch of land lying north of the central region of Vietnam,

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from 17<sup>0</sup>53' to 20<sup>0</sup>02' northern latitude and from 103<sup>0</sup>02' to 106<sup>0</sup>30' eastern longitude, with an area of 22,502 square kilometers. Nghe Tinh has a 564 km border line with Laos and an eastern coastal line of 230 km. Its narrowest width is 80 km (Ha Tinh), and its largest width is 200 km (Nghe An) (Many authors, 1986). The Nghe Land borders Thanh Hoa (the Thanh Land) to the north and is separated from Quang Binh to the south by the Hoanh Son mountain range, stretching 300 km from north to south.

Compared to the Thanh Land, the Hue Land and the Quang Land in the central region, the Nghe cultural sub-region spans the largest area, covering 25 districts, provincial towns and cities. In such a territory, the nature of the Nghe Land is truly *diverse, rich* and *extreme*. These natural characteristics have left many vestiges in the economic, cultural and social life of the population in this region. The book *History of Unification of Great Vietnam* calls Nghe An “*the land of four obstructions*”, meaning the region is difficult to access from all four directions.

The natural environment of the Nghe Land is divided into three parts: endless mountains and hills in the west, immense sea in the east and plains in the center. However, in many areas, mountains, the sea and plains overlap, creating diverse and wonderful landscapes:

“The road to the Nghe Land is winding

Green mountains and azure waters are just like a picturesque painting

Whoever desires to travel to the Nghe Land is greatly encouraged”

Mountains and midland cover most of the land of the Nghe region. The western mountainous area of the Nghe Land is mainly formed by the two mountain ranges – *Phu Hoat Mountain* in the north belonging to the Ca River’s upstream and the northern section of the *Truong Son mountain range* towards the south. These mountain ranges have rather high peaks such as 2,453m high Phu Hoat and 2,711m high Phu Lai Leng, which is the highest peak of the northern part of the Truong Son Range. The locals call it *Giang Man Range*, declaring it the natural border line between Nghe Tinh and Laos. Further to the south are peaks such as *Giang Man* and *Ong Giao* (1,407m high), where the topography is difficult to access and were the resistance bases of the Phan Dinh Phung’s insurgent army camped to fight French colonialists.

The transitional area from mountains to plains are low hills which are characterized by the midland, stretching from Nghia Dan, Quy Hop, Tan Ky and Anh Son in the north to Can Loc, Thach Ha, Cam Xuyen and Ky Anh in the south. This low hilly area was previously covered by rain forests, which are now mostly destroyed and are bare hills.

The lowland of Nghe Tinh, estimated at about 3,400 square kilometers, accounts for 15% of the total area of the whole region, with small plains such as Quynh Luu, Yen Thanh, Dien Chau, Nghi Loc, Hung Nguyen, Nam Dan, Nghi Xuan, Duc Tho, Can Loc, Thach Ha, Cam Xuyen and Ky Anh. The plains in the Nghe Land are often narrow as there are no river deltas and no separation caused by mountain branches jutting out to

the sea. The soil is poor and the areas close to the sea are often infiltrated by salty water. However, for a long time now, the narrow and infertile plains have been grown with rice and subsidiary crops to feed millions of people from the Nghe Land.

The Nghe Land has 230 km of coast line, accounting for 7% of the total coast line of the country. This shows how significant a role the marine environment plays in the material and spiritual life of the population in this region. The sea areas here are often shallow with many mountain branches jutting out forming capes such as Dau Rong (Dragon Head), Lach Quen, Cua Lo, Cuong Gian, Sot, and Cua Nhuong. There are many rivers flowing into the sea with many estuaries such as Cua Hoi, Cua Trap, Cua Van, Cua Lo, Cua Nhuong and Cua Khau. These systems of *capes* and *estuaries* provide the coastal region with many gulfs and lagoons, and creates a very favorable environment for fishing and aquaculture, and together with big and small islands such as Nghi Son, Hon Ngu, Hon Mat, Hon En, Hon Boc, Con Chim, and Son Duong, they add to the natural beauty and the “marine” characteristics in the lives of the people here (Many authors, 1986).

Nature did not endow the Nghe Land with much and the weather is very harsh here. In winter the weather is too humid while summers are hot and dry with many hurricanes and storms sweeping in from the East Sea. Some hot and dry spells from Laos can burn plants and other living things here and flooding often occurs. During such natural calamities, people can do nothing but pray for Heaven’s support.

“Heaven threatens with one rainstorm  
Heaven threatens with two rainstorms  
Water overflows fields and rivers”

The following *main eco-systems* are located in the Nghe Lan: *Mountain, midland, lowland, sea*, which can be divided into smaller eco-systems more suitable to the biodiversity with respect to the geographical landscape of each area. For this reason, the Nghe Land has been divided into 7 geographical landscape zones along the east and west of the region. The Eastern area is comprised of four zones: *Zone 1* (Quynh Luu, Yen Thanh, Dien Chau), *Zone 2* (Nghi Loc, Nghi Xuan, Can Loc, Duc Tho), *Zone 3* (Anh Son, Do Luong, Thanh Chuong, Nam Dan, Huong Nguyen and Vinh City), and *Zone 4* (Thach Ha, Cam Xuyen, Ky Anh). The Western area is comprised of three zones: *Zone 5* (Huong Son, Huong Khe-Ngan Sau and Ngan Pho Valleys), *Zone 6* (Tuong Duong, Ky Son, Con Cuong), *Zone 7* (Nghia Dan, Quy Chau, Quy Hop, Que Phong, Tan Ky - in the Hieu and Con River area) (Nguyen Dong Chi (ed.), 1995).

3. Research has shown, the Nghe Land was the *earliest area to be inhabited by men* and was the region that built *the civilized culture of Vietnam*. With the discovery of archeological sites in Tham Om Cave, archeologists found human teeth as well as animal skeletons dating back about 3 million to 10,000 years. It marks the process of development from primate to wise men (*Homo sapiens*).

Including the Son Vi Culture in the Northern region (in post old stone age),

some archeological sites dating back to the same period have been found in the Nghe Land such as Doi Trung (Thanh Dong), and Doi Rang (Thanh Huong, Thanh Chuong) on the bank of the Lam River. These sites date back 20,000 to 10,000 years. Then archeological sites of the Hoa Binh Culture have also been found in limestone caves in Que Phong, Con Cuong, Tuong Duong, Tan Ky and Quy Chau, dating back nearly 10,000 years, when men evolved from hunting and gathering to farming.

Although archaeological sites of Bac Son Culture from the initial stage of the New Stone Age have rarely been seen in Nghe Tinh, relics of the Con So Diep (also called by the locals Con Diep, Ru Diep) belonging to the archaeological culture of Quynh Van (Quynh Luu, Nghe An) have been found here. Those of the Quynh Van Culture knew how to exploit natural resources in the ecological areas where mountain branches jut out to the sea, where there was high biodiversity and rich natural resources, particularly forest and sea resources.

Belonging to the *post- New Stone Age*, human residential areas expanded to mountains, plains and coastal regions. During the same period of the Bau Tro archaeological site (Quang Binh province), many archeological relics of the Nghe Land have been found such as those in Cam Xuyen, Thach Ha, Duc Tho, Can Loc, Nghi Xuan, Dien Chau, and Quynh Luu. The population of the post - New Stone Age knew farming, ceramics, sharpening stone tools and drilling stones perfectly, all preparation for the metal age.

In the Nghe Land, many archaeological sites of the pre-Dong Son Culture and Dong Son Culture have been found such as Trai Oi (Quynh Luu), Doi Den (Tuong Duong), Len Hai Vai (Dien Chau), and Ru Tran (Nam Dan). They mark the start of Dong Son Culture's development in the Lam River basin such as the villages of Vac, Dong Mom (Dien Chau), and Xuan An (Nghi Xuan). Under the Dong Son Culture, bronze casting thrived here. Moulds for casting axes and daggers made of sandstone have been found in Vac Village and terra-cotta ladles for ladling bronze, stained with bronze slag have been found in Dong Mom Village. There is evidence of the development of bronze casting in Nghe Tinh. There were different types of metal tools such as plough blades, spades, axes, chisels, sharpening tools and containers such as pots, rice jugs, jars, and pans; and other beautiful things such as belt locks, tintinnabulas with beautiful decorations and ladles; and many weapons such as daggers, spears, arrows and javelins. At the Dong Son archaeological sites in the Nghe Land, many types of jewelry have been found such as earrings, bracelets, anklets with tintinnabulas and bells. The artifacts symbolizing the Dong Son Culture include bronze drums which were found in the villages of Vac, Ru Quyet and Dong Hieu. Iron refining has made great progress within the Dong Son Culture: Iron refining furnaces in Dong Mom (Dien Chau), and Xuan Giang (Nghi Xuan) have also been discovered. Those artifacts show that Nghe Tinh was once a *center of the Dong Son Culture*.

Those who lived in the Nghe Land during the Dong Son Culture were classified

as ancient Vietnamese whose residential areas were the Red River Delta and the northern part of the Central region, together with their southern neighbors (in the southern bank of the Gianh River) who were from Sa Huynh Culture, the ancient Mon-Khmer people from the western mountainous areas and the ancient Tay and Thai in the north. Those were the areas where the ancient Vietnamese lived and the Van Lang – Au Lac ancient state was formed. The Vac Village Culture in Nghe An, although characterized by its local identity, belonged to the Dong Son Culture who were the ancient Vietnamese themselves.

Under Chinese domination and the early stage of the self-ruled feudalist regime, there had been certain division between the population of the Red River Delta and those in the northern part of the central region. Due to the impact of social factors and cultural exchanges, the ancient Vietnamese gradually became modern Vietnamese, in terms of both race and culture. In particular, the Red River Delta belonged to the “four inner towns” affiliated to the Thang Long Capital, with a level of socio-economic development higher than other regions and was directly influenced by the Chinese civilization while Thanh Hoa, particularly Chau Hoan and Chau Ai was considered the “outer town” region or “Farm” region, with a lower level of socio-economic development and limited influence of the Chinese culture. Thus, this region still retains more cultural elements of the ancient Vietnamese, in terms of the language, customs and ceremonies, etc. than the central part of northern Vietnam.

The plains and the coastal areas along the Nghe Land were inhabited by the Kinh (Viet), the western mountainous areas were inhabited by ethnic minority groups such as Thai, Kh’Mu, Tho, Odu, and Hmong, of which the Thai and Hmong moved in from other parts several centuries ago; other groups of the Viet-Muong (Tho...), and Mon-Khmer (Kh’Mu) linguistic families were local groups which had long shared the land with the Viet. This indicates that the Nghe Land was once diverse not only in its natural environment but also races and ethnic groups, forming cultural diversity.

4. The Nghe Land is a historical land in the evolution of the thousand-year history of the nation. Under Chinese domination that lasted a thousand years, during the fight against foreign invaders then assimilation and lively cultural exchanges, the Nghe Land always offered memorable events for the entire nation. History books state that when the insurrection of the Trung Sisters failed in Giao Chi, their female general Do Duong from Cuu Chan District (comprising Thanh Nghe Tinh) continued the resistance war for a period of time longer. In the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, a brother of Ly Nam De, Ly Thien Bao, together with Ly Thieu Long took over Cuu Chan (present day Ha Tinh province) and waged a war against the Luong Dynasty. In the early 8<sup>th</sup> century, Mai Thuc Loan, known as the “Black King” (Mai Hac De) rose up in arms and liberated a large area, comprised of Chau Hoan, Chau Dien and Ai Chau, proclaimed himself emperor and built citadels in Van An.

During the Dai Viet era, the Nghe Land played an important role for the cause of national defense and construction. Le Tu Tan said “Dynasties should use it (Nghe An) to prevent the south westerners from invading,” considering it a shield in the southern part of Dai Viet nation before the Ly – Tran Dynasty. Before the Le Dynasty took the throne, Le Dai Hanh had the Sat Canal dug to expand and develop the economy of this region. Under the Tran Dynasty, the State had organized many land excavations, called Dinh Phien farms from Nghi Xuan to Ky Anh, stabilizing both the economy and border territory. Under the Tran Dynasty, Dien Chau was a trading town, attracting business people from other countries (Champa, Java, Japan ...).

In the resistance war against the Mongolian Yuan, when the enemy occupied many areas in Northern Vietnam, including Thang Long Capital, the Tran Dynasty considered Hoan Dien the land for reserves of forces for a protracted war of resistance.

“Coi Ke was a former place for military registration

Hoan Dien has a reserve force of hundreds of thousands of men”

During the resistance war against the Ming enemy, under the leadership of Le Loi, General Nguyen Chich, from Thanh Hoa, based on Nghe Tinh, “an important but nearly inaccessible region, with vast land and large population,” fought back and took over Nghe An to expand the rear, thus enhancing the reputation of the insurrection army, wiping out the Ming invaders, and winning the final victory.

Under the Tay Son period, realizing the important position of the Nghe Land, an intermediate area between Phu Xuan and Thang Long Capital, Phuong Hoang Trung Do Citadel was built in Nghe An (Dinh Gia Khanh et al., 1995).

In the war of resistance against the French colonialists, from the Can Vuong (Royalist) and Van Than (Scholar) Movement to the Xo Viet Nghe Tinh Movement and the Indochinese Democratic Front, the people of the Nghe Land made valuable contributions. The resistance war against US imperialists that led to the liberation of South Vietnam and reunification of the country was also possible because of the great contributions of the Nghe people.

5. When writing about the Nghe Land, the first thing we should mention is its people, its most impressive and unique symbol. Humans are the products of nature, history, society and culture, in turn; they create that history, society and culture. Nowhere in Vietnam, have the people been discussed as much, especially about their psychology and character, as the people in the Nghe Land. Bui Duong Lich in “Nghe An Chronicle” wrote: “Nghe An people are simple-hearted, honest, with slow and keen characters, thus they are very careful in what they do, firm and less affected by the immediate benefits or losses” (Cited from Nguyen Dong Chi (ed.), 1995). Prof. Dinh Gia Khanh has analyzed the characters of the Nghe people: “They are used to hardship, are industrious, economical, brave and ingenious. They can stand suffering but not shame. In their courage there is

stubbornness; in their honesty there is roughness; and in their ingeniousness there is venture.” He added: “Chivalry, straightforwardness, self-abnegation for the greater cause, strong sense of community, and great patriotism are the common characteristics of the Vietnamese and they are portrayed most clearly in the Nghe people” (Dinh Gia Khanh, 1997). For his part, Vu Ngoc Khanh highlighted some other psychosocial traits of the people of the Nghe Land: “Ideal in soul, harsh in life, and firm in communication.” Ninh Viet Giao, a famous “Ngheologist” describes the ego of the Nghe Land more generally: “No where the ego is as clear as in this region...It can be said that there is a spirit of Nghe Tinh. That spirit shows clearly the worship and Endeavour as well as the patience and determination of a material agricultural nation, trying to gain a space to live under the sun” (Ninh Viet Giao, 1958). And this is what a foreigner said about the Nghe Land: “Nghe Tinh is one of the most typical and unique regions in Indochina. The people of this province are firm, prefer to befriend literature, are hard working and accept sufferings in face of the ungratefulness from the land that feeds them” (Cited from Nguyen Dong Chi (ed.), 1995).

Another precious character of the Nghe people, is the thirst for knowledge learning not only for knowledge but also a means to “change of their life.” Thus, at least from the Le Dynasty until now, this land has produced a large number of intellectuals, many of whom are classic Vietnamese intellectuals. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Le Trac commented: “The people of Hoan Dien are good-natured,

handsome and intelligent and very studious.” In the Tran Dynasty, to encourage “remote and isolated areas,” the Royal Court established the degree of “Trại Trạng nguyên” (first farm doctoral candidate), which is a bit easier than “Kinh Trạng nguyên”(first capital doctoral candidate). Later on more and more people from the rural areas (meaning Nghe Land) passed extremely high degree royal exams. Under the Ly Dynasty, the land of Hong Lam (the Nghe Land) accounted for only 1/16 of the total number of doctors of the whole country, under the Nguyen Dynasty, candidates from the Hong Lam Land accounted for one fifth of the total number of candidates in all 39 second-degree examinations and royal court examinations (Nguyen Dong Chi (ed.), 1995).

An intellectual figure from the Nghe Land is called a Nghe Scholar, someone who shows a fine combination of folklore and academia. Nghe scholars are intellectuals who learned from sages and saints, but for certain reasons, they failed higher degree royal exams, thus could not become mandarins and had to return to their native villages to work as teachers. They are intellectuals, but their lifestyle is that of a farmer, very close to the people and possessing a deep understanding of the poor and miserable life of farmers in a feudalist society, were occasionally representatives or spokespersons for the people. Sometimes their voice went against the then corrupt regime and at times they fought back, urging farmers to join insurrections against feudalist regimes.

On culture, they are key figures in the countryside, making active contributions to

preserving and developing traditional cultures. For example, *ve* folk singing developed so strongly in the Nghe Land that the Book *Treasure of Nghe Ve Folk singing* was recently published in 9 volumes. The principle theme for *ve* singing *tells* of the current situation, politics and social life. Nghe scholars are the main authors of this type of folklore literature (Ninh Viet Giao (ed.), 1999-2002). In addition, they also took part in building and maintaining rites, ceremonies and festivals in rural areas. They were the creators of village policies and fixed-price contracts of rural villages and communes (Ngo Duc Thinh, 2003).

However, the Nghe Land provided a unique environment producing distinctive Nghe scholars with upright and strong characteristics mixed with “a slight madness.” They led a poor and economical life. Many traveled far and wide, working as family tutors to earn a living. Nghe scholars were known for being impoverished, yet kind-hearted.

This is great discussion about the “slightly mad” character of the Nghe people: Without traveling there you will never know where Nghe An is/ Once you are there, you will see just how mad they are. So what does this “slight madness” mean? Is it the psychological state in which a discrepancy exists between reason and reality, forcing reality to follow the direction of reasoning, thus leading to awareness and action, which is considered behavior outside of societal norms.

6. In the Nghe Land, *the academic and folk cultures are rich and diverse*. Discussion about Nghe folklore and folk literature, first mention should be given to its

language and voice. The voice is the first and most impressive source of information about the Nghe people, a local dialect very unique in the Vietnamese language. In terms of rhythm, the Nghe dialect is “strong”, a bit difficult and crude to hear. There is no difference between the “tilde” and the drop tone. In terms of vocabulary, compared to other dialects in the Vietnamese language, the Nghe dialect has maintained many elements of the ancient Vietnamese language or the pre-Viet-Muong linguistic family. According to Nguyen Dong Chi, Nghe Tinh folk singing “contains the plainness of the ancient Vietnamese and those who lived in mountainous areas whose life was simple and isolated.” In the Nghe Land, there also exists a variety of dialects. It is a dialect oasis creating an image of local residents with a “strong” accent in some places and a “sour”, or “sweet” accent in others.

Aside from academic literature, the Nghe Land has a treasure of rich and unique traditional cultures, spanning all genres such as ancient tales, legends, folk-songs, *ve* singing, idioms, and proverbs; traditional architectural styles and sculptures, paintings, and traditional decorations; religious beliefs, customs and festivals; and a expansive library of folklore. Of the above-mentioned forms, the most typical and rich are oral *literature, popular art forms and traditional folk knowledge*. As for architectural relics, belief systems, religion, housing, dress and household tools, most do not reach other areas due to the hindrance of geographical environment, difficult living conditions and human destruction of the surroundings. In another words, the intangible aspects of the

Nghe culture continue to have a stronger and richer presence than tangible cultural aspects.

The traditional oral narrative genre is quite rich: in addition to traditional story telling, other forms such as anecdotes, *ve*, fables, tales about the first doctoral candidates, and legends have also developed. Humorous stories in combination with the custom of talking big of villages about first doctoral candidates, and broken pieces of mythological stories have a strong presence from primitive elements through which we can restore the mythological system and ancient epics about our nation. Fables were not very plentiful here, but there are some forms, for example *hat ve* (*ve* singing) with thousands of different *ve* songs. Besides covering political and social topics about the Nghe Land, they tell about production practices, particularly fishing which provide precious folk knowledge still applicable in today's society.

In this treasure of folk stories, we see both common features found in the country and the local identity in the region. Aside from widespread stories such as Tao Ao and Princess Lieu Hanh, other stories, such as Co Bo and Pham Vien, are only known locally. Within the Nghe Land, some places such as Hong Linh are rich in old tales and legends; others are rich in humorous stories such as Thanh Chuong and Can Loc. Stories about Co Bo and wrestling are popular in Nam Dan and Hung Nguyen, while the story of Princess Lieu Hanh and stories about animals are famous in the southern part of Nghe Tinh from Lach ferry station southward. People in some villages such as Hau Luat and Trung Phuong are fond of *ve* and tell *ve* stories

while those in other villages prefer *nom* stories and *cheo* (popular opera) dialogues about Ich Hau and Truong Luu (Ninh Viet Giao (ed.), 1994).

*Vi* and *dam* are two types of popular and unique folk singing in the Nghe Land. *Dam* folk singing has long been associated with Nghe Tinh. Meaning, nowhere in the country is this type of folk singing as popular as in the Nghe Land. *Dam* folk singing is unique not only in terms of its close link to the dialect of this land, but also in terms of its music. *Dam* songs express the attitude, feelings, sentiments and ideology of the Nghe people under the form of the 5-sentence verses. There are two types of *dam* folk singing: 1) Singing by repartees between men and women; and 2) Singing by monologue. Singing by repartees between men and women is about love and follows the following sequence: *hat dao* (prelude), *hat chao* (welcoming), *hat do* (posing riddles), *hat xe ket* (making friends) and *hat tien* (farewell). Although it is very popular, *hat dam* (*dam* folk singing) was best developed and preserved by the people in Thach Ha and Cam Xuyen and also in Do Luong and Hung Nguyen. However, at present, *hat dam* has somehow faded away.

Alongside *hat dam*, *hat vi* is another type of folksinging, very popular among the Nghe people. In another words, *hat vi* is present everywhere in the Nghe Land. In Quynh Luu and Thanh Chuong, this type of folksong is called *hat gheo* (love song). Different to *hat dam* whose melody expresses the harsh and firm characters of the Nghe people, *hat vi*, singing by repartees between men and women, has a sweet,

ardent, graceful and lovable melody. However, *hat vi performances* are closely linked to the working environment of different professions. People sing under the moonlight while working. For example:

*Vi phuong vai* (*hat vi* among textile workers) is typical in Nam Dan.

*Vi phuong non* (*hat vi* among hat makers) is typical in Nghi Xuan, Ky Anh and Thach Ha.

*Vi phuong dan* (*hat vi* among weavers) is typical in Nghi Loc and Thach Ha.

*Vi phuong ben vong* (*hat vi* among hammock makers) is typical in Ky Anh and Dien Chau.

*Vi phuong chap gai dan luoi* (*hat vi* among spinners and fishnet makers) is typical in coastal villages.

There are others such as *Vi phuong roc cau* (*hat vi* among areca peelers), *Vi phuong lau mia* (*hat vi* among sugarcane growers), *Vi phuong cay* (*hat vi* among rice growers), *Vi phuong gat* (*hat vi* among rice harvesters), *Vi do dua* or *Vi phuong noc* (*hat vi* among boat rowers), *Vi phuong buon* (*hat vi* among merchants), *Vi phuong cui* (*hat vi* among firewood gatherers), *Vi phuong co* (*hat vi* among weeding people), etc. However, of those *hat vi* forms, *Vi phuong vai* is most popular and stable in terms of its order and rules. *Vi phuong vai* is not linked to ceremonies or festivals but can be sung anywhere, at any time. It is linked to normal, daily work of the average farmer, spinner or weaver.

The procession of a big *Vi phuong vai* event is held in three stages. The first stage

comprises of *hat dao*, *hat chao*, *hat mung* and *hat hoi*, meaning the meeting and welcoming. The middle stage comprises *hat do* and *hat doi* (singing by repartees), requiring men and women to use their intelligence, cleverness, politeness and sophistication. This stage of *hat do and hat doi* often requires the participation of Confucian scholars who play the role of masters. This is the reason why sometimes in the repartees, singers use classic references with scholarly and biting lyrics. The last stage is *hat moi* (inviting), *hat xe ket* (making friends) and *hat tien* (farewell). These are the stages of a large-scale *hat vi* event. In normal life, particularly while working in the field with limited time, a *hat vi* event cannot always take place in such extensive detail.

In a famous work “Nghe Tinh Folklore Monography” edited by Professor Nguyen Dong Chi, the section “Folk Knowledge” is most notable, not only because the study of this issue has yet to gain due attention by Vietnamese folklorists, but also because of its richness and uniqueness. It is also considered an exemplary study on this issue.

Nguyen Dong Chi has presented the issue of folk knowledge in the Nghe Land from many perspectives. The Nghe people not only created a treasure of rich folk knowledge, but also preserved it until today. Nghe folk knowledge is expressed in different aspects of human life. In particular, most of it has been summarized in the forms of idioms, proverbs and local sayings characterized clearly by the Nghe local identity, which cannot be mistaken for other localities.

One of the areas of folk knowledge people have focused on is the environment where each person or community is connected to since birth. They include knowledge about the soil, forests, sea, weather, rain and sunshine, floods and storms, etc. These experiences are linked to the characteristics of each location. For example:

“When clouds loom over Xuoc Mountain, one will catch rainwater soon (in Quynh Luu).

Whenever there there are clouds over Ru Quyet and lightning in Cua Lo, it will rain (in Nghi Loc).

Whenever Dai Hue wears palm-leaf raincoat and Ru Dun wears hat, it will certainly rain” (in Nam Dan)... (Nguyen Dong Chi (ed.), 1995).

Folk knowledge on geography includes natural geography, historical geography and fengsui geography. Folk songs, idioms and proverbs about rivers and mountains and forest resources from each location contain profound understanding of climatic conditions of the land and also express people’s pride for their native land. For example: “The land of Tho Lang (Thanh Chuong) is rich in oranges and tangerines, the land of Ru Mit has both tangerines and grapefruits” or “Wild betel, areca and tobacco for whoever wants come to Ke Nau with me,” etc. In some places there are songs about maps and geography of each location, such as the song about *Nhuong Ban Map* and *Phu Luu Geography* (comprised of 50 verses) and *Quynh Luu Geography* (134 verses)...

Folk knowledge has also been gathered and expressed through production, cultivation, husbandry, fishing and

handicrafts. As mentioned before, the fishing experience of the Nghe people is not only expressed through idioms and proverbs such as “in twilight, bright sky, scads wander around, whoever has got bait, go fishing”, but also through a number of songs about fishing tales at sea (Ninh Viet Giao (ed.), 1999-2002). The richest are the experiences and knowledge on traditional medicine. Perhaps, it is because of this that many famous physicians came from this region, including Hai Thuong Lan Ong Le Huu Trac in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

7. *The academic literature and culture* is also rich in the Nghe Land. As mentioned earlier, the Nghe Land is famous for its studiousness, at least since the Le Dynasty. In addition, a number of Confucian scholars are Nghe scholars as well, many of whom passed royal exams and became mandarins and great intellectuals of their time. On academic works, the Nghe scholars have been closely related to numerous valuable works such as Ho Tong Thoc and Nguyen Du with “Hong Son Literary School”, Ho Xuan Huong, Nguyen Cong Tru, Phan Boi Chau, etc. The Nghe Land has also garnered the interest of a number of intellectuals with different works in the form of chronicles and biographies about figures, communes, districts, provinces and beauty spots as well as many anthologies. The scholars and the written literature of the Nghe Land give emphasis to three things. *First*, the role of this intellectual stratum is inseparable from the formation and development of folk culture in the Nghe Land. These academics directly created and contributed to developing and disseminating folklore as they were close to and had a profound understanding of the aspiration of people

while having the knowledge and the capacity to create and preserve the values of traditional cultures. *Second*, their academic works came primarily from the intelligence and talent of the common people, who collected, selected and revised them. In many cases they have folklorized and enriched the treasure of folklore. The Story of Kieu by great Poet Nguyen Du is a case in point, symbolizing such a changing process. There developed a folk culture and an academic professional culture, yet there is no clear line between the two. *Third*, in a “farm” and “fence” region environment, with hard climatic and natural conditions, exhausted soil, and a struggling economy, the Nghe Land is a region not only rich in folklore full of potential, but also in developed civilization, leaving behind famous literary works and a number of talented and righteous figures. Nguyen Dong Chi in the work “Nghe Tinh Folklore Monography” held that Nghe Tinh was once a center of the country’s civilization (Nguyen Dong Chi (ed.), 1995).

8. The Nghe people have had a rich spiritual life, showing the consciousness of not only people farming in the plain, but also those fishing at the sea and living a subsistent life in a mountainous environment. However, the worship of *Tu Vi Thanh Nuong* (the Four Goddesses) is most typical for fishermen in the Nghe Land, and from here this religious belief has spread to other coastal regions from North to South.

The worship of the Four Goddesses is very popular in many Viet villages along the sea coastal region from North to South. It is also practiced by people in villages along big rivers deep in the mainland plains. However, the worship is most popular in the north

central coastal region with the epicenter at Con Temple (in Nghe An). According to Ninh Viet Giao, in addition to Con Temple, another 30 villages in Quynh Luu (Nghe An) worship the Four Goddesses. In Hoang Hoa district (Thanh Hoa province) 20 villages practice the worship of the Four Goddesses (Ninh Viet Giao, 2001). Many places in Northern Vietnam worship the Four Goddesses in the form of the Sung Queen and Heaven Queen. In Southern Vietnam, it is practiced in Dong Nai and Song Be provinces, very deep in the mainland. So it can be said that along with the worship of *ca ong* (the Whale), the worship of the Four Goddesses is popular and plays one of the most important roles in the spiritual life of Vietnamese fishermen.

With existing material, we have had a variety of versions of the legend of the Four Goddesses.

The most popular and latest version of the Four Goddesses legend is related to the *Sung Queen and princesses of the southern Sung Dynasty*. Briefly summarized, the story goes as follows: In 1276, the Mongolian Yuan army attacked the southern part of the Sung land, defeating hundreds of thousands of Sung men. In January 1279, the Yuan army attacked the last base of the Southern Sung army. In distress, the Queen Mother and princesses of the Sung Dynasty embarked on a boat running to Guangdong, but the boat was sunken by strong wind, killing them all. Suddenly, a gold dragon appeared to come to the rescue. The queen mother and three princesses drifted to Con Hai coastal area (Nghe An) and were saved by an old monk from Quy Son Pagoda, and eventually made a home there.

After staying in the pagoda for

sometime, there was gossip about the affairs between the old monk and the queen. The old monk could not clear his name, prayed to Buddha and committed suicide by jumping into the sea. The Queen Mother and three princesses, realizing that the old monk was the victim of an injustice, which was her fault, she decided to jump into the sea, taking her life. Their dead bodies were washed to Con Hai Estuary. Their story became an inspiring, powerful tale and the local people built a temple dedicated to them. They were conferred with the title *Southern Sea Good Genii* to administer 12 estuaries. Since then, before going sea fishing, fishermen often go to pray for the Four Goddesses and many miracles have taken place since then.

Later on, King Tran Anh Tong and King Le Thanh Tong went by sea to conquer the Champa enemy in the southern region and were supported by the Four Goddesses. After winning victory and returning, the kings of Dai Viet organized an offering ceremony and proclaimed the *Mother of the Country to the four Fish Genii* and the *four Top Class Genii to the Great Sage of the South Sea Nation*. This event was written in the book *Viet Dien u linh* (the Viet Temple dedicated to dead souls) by Ly Te Xuyen. However, in ancient books as well as in genealogy and stories of the gods and oral legends there are some differences about the Four Goddesses. Besides the Sung Queen, who are the three others? Where they princesses or maids of King De Binh?

- Different to the above-mentioned legend, a legendary story about the Four Goddesses in Phu Nghia relates to ancient royal life. The story tells that a queen gave birth to two princesses when the king was

old and wanted to have a son to succeed him to the throne. When the queen was pregnant for the third time, the king said to her “If you give birth to another girl, strangle her to death!” The queen did give birth to another girl. Upon hearing the news after his return from a mission, he ordered the deportation of the queen and her daughter to a faraway island in the sea. On the way there, they faced the rough sea and drifted to Con Estuary and decided to stay there until they died. Later on they became the *Nam Hai De Than* (Southern Sea Genii) controlling the wind and rain at sea.

In his book *Ta Chi Dai Truong* said that according to O Chau Can Luc by Duong Van An, this legend was related to the 13<sup>th</sup> Hung King with a thrilling story about an attempt by a royal concubine who, scrambling for the throne, ordered the penis of a new-born prince cut. She was then deported and died at sea only later to become a genie (*Ta Chi Dai Truong*, 1989).

- In another legend, the Con story refers to the drifting of “magic wood.” One night, a piece of magical wood drifted into Can Mieu village. Villagers did not know it was magical, and thus allowed it to drift to Phu Luong Village. An old fisherman from Phu Luong saw the strange piece of wood on the ground and tried chopping it. Suddenly a scent came out of the wood. Knowing it was magical wood, Phu Luong villagers built a temple dedicated to it. Since then, village fishermen have been prosperous in catching fish and shrimp. After learning of this, the people in Can Mieu Village began regretting being so abusive to the piece of wood and attempted to get it back. The fairy of the Dragon King came to them in a dream, and the villagers

prepared to build a temple. To their surprise, after a night of strong rain and wind, wood drifted to the village, enough to build the temple. The villagers believed that it too was magical wood. After the temple was built, the scented wood pieces were carved into statues and worshipped at the temple. Can Mieu village was also renamed Huong Can (Phuong Can). Since then, there has been the practice of running included in the Con Temple festival, reproducing the legend of fighting between the two villages of Phuong Can and Phu Luong for the magical wood (Ngo Duc Think (ed.), 2000).

Through the legend and the worship of the Four Goddesses in many places, particularly at Con Temple, what is understood? First, the legend is of a Sea Genie who was said to be a fairy of the Dragon King in the above-mentioned legend. She hid in the magical wood, drifted into Phuong Can village and turned into a genie to help fishermen, thus later warranting worship. This legend reminds us of the Legend of Pon Inu Gar — the Mother of the Kingdom of Champa. She also hid in a piece of scent wood and drifted to China only later to gain awe inspiring power and married a Chinese Prince.

In many places, although people worship the Four Goddesses, in fact, only one turned out to be awe-inspiringly powerful, i.e. the Sung Queen or the Queen of Heaven. In some places, people merged the Sung Queen and the Heaven Queen into one. This genie was spread to all coastal areas in the form of a drifting statue or a drifting piece of magical wood. For example, at the Holy Mother Temple in Tra Co village (Quang Ninh province), people worship the Queen of Heave as a principle genie. Legend

has it that on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March (the time for worshipping the Holy Mother — August is for the worship of the Holy Father) a goddess statue drifted ashore at the present place where the Holy Mother Temple is located. At that time, a group of carpenters who were building a house damaged the statue and were immediately punished. After that incident, villagers took the statue and built a temple for it.

It's possible that the legend of the Four Goddesses related to the Sung Queen or a queen or a royal concubine of a Vietnamese court came late in the religious culture. Whether it is about the Four Goddesses (a queen and thee princesses) or only about the Sung Queen, it has evolved into the tale of a Goddess and entered religious history as the *Holy Mother of Worship* for the Vietnamese, even the Holy Mother of Three Palaces or Four Palaces. Also for this reason, the system of Four Goddesses or the Sung Queen has “drifted” through rivers deep into the mainland and entered the Dragon King — Thoai Phu course.

If based on the title, Four Goddesses, given by different royal dynasties in the Dai Viet nation such as “Dai Can Thanh Nuong” (Great Fish Genie), “Dai Can Quoc Gia Nam Hai” (Great Southern Sea Fish Genii), what does the title “Dai Can” mean? The word “can” in the title “Dai Can” is the same word “can” as in “Can khon” (Heaven and earth) in the book of Changes. There is no relation between the origins of these water genii. However, according to Binh Nguyen Loc and other linguists as well as recent history, the word “can” comes from the Malayo - Polynesian linguistic family: can = kan = ca (fish). So, if it is explained by historical phonology, not transcribing it phonetically

from the Chinese language, the Four Goddesses came from the worship of fish, the Fish Goddess. If this hypothesis is true, the main place of worship and the place where the legend of the Four Goddesses came from is Con Temple, meaning the Temple dedicated to *the Fish Goddess*. This is coincidental with the worship of the *Fish Goddess* in many central coastal areas, for example, in Nhuong Ban (Ha Tinh province), the *Fish Goddess* became the Village Tutelary God.

Ta Chi Dai Truong in the book “Gods, People and the Vietnamese Land” believed that there is more of a correlation between the legend and the worship of the Four Goddesses and the ancient religious belief of the Cham people. In his opinion, the Four Goddesses are sea genii who came from the Cham Culture — they are *Po Riyak* (Po Rayak), the River and Sea Genie whose wooden temple was discovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Dinh Cape. Po Riyak was a male saint, whose gender was later changed to female and therefore he became a goddess and entered religious history as the Four Goddesses of the Viet people (Ta Chi Dai Truong, 1989).

From this documentation and above-mentioned analysis, we can temporarily pose a hypothesis about the changes of the sea genii - the Four Goddesses. Of course, this is just a working hypothesis therefore real material in the future will either confirm or reject our hypothesis:

- The earliest form of worship of the Four Goddesses was the belief of worshipping the fish (kan, can) of the local people (the Viet or the Cham). Later on it turned into more supernatural powers of a fairy, Sea Genie or Goddess.

- Much later, this belief of worshipping fish and a sea genie was

influenced by China or the Dai Viet civilization and even the whole system of Cham Deities to be *personalized and historicalized* into the system of *human deities* in which the royal courts angelized the title of *Tu Vi Thanh Nuong* (Four Goddesses) and *Dai Can Thanh Nuong* (Great Fish Goddesses). This was the time when the concepts of loyalty, devotion, virtue and righteousness of Confucianism were introduced to display and promote the social and ethical values of the deities. In particular, after becoming genii, the Four Goddesses were the forces helping the cause of national construction and defense of Dai Viet feudalism regimes.

9. The Nghe Land, in history as well as at present, has a quite strong kinetic energy in population although the region is not densely populated. According to *Earlier Han Book*, in the first century AD, Ham Hoan District (present day Nghe Tinh) had 5,000 households with about 20,000 people. Meanwhile according to the *Later Han Book*, in the first century AD, this region had 6,000 households and 30,000 people. By the 7<sup>th</sup> century, according to *Sui Book*, the region housed 9,915 households. The *Viet dien u linh* (Temple of the dead souls) says that under the Ly Dynasty, in Chau Nghe An (including Ha Tinh) there were 46,450 households and 54,364 men. According to statistics from Ming invaders, in 1417 Nghe An had 7,660 households and 16,066 people. By 1819, Nghe An had 65,400 men. Today the population of Nghe Tinh is 3,121,500 people (1986). Its population growth rate is 2% which is rather high compared to the rest of the country. It is one of the most populous regions in Vietnam (Cited from many authors, 1986).

In history as well as at present, the Nghe population has a tendency of high migration. In history, particularly in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, some ethnic groups here moved to the northern part, especially the coastal areas of North Vietnam, even to the mountainous areas. Some families that were leaders of the heads of Tay territory in Lang Son province are descendants of the Viet from Nghe An (Ngo Duc Thinh, 1987). After the Ly, Tran and Le Dynasties expanded the borders of Dai Viet southwards the State mobilized many people from Nghe Tinh and Thanh Hoa to reclaim land in Thuan Quang. In modern times, the Nghe population migrated to many provinces and cities nationwide, particularly major cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to earn their living, thus the proportion of the Nghe population there is high. Different to the people migrating from Hue to Ho Chi Minh City or Hanoi who still preserve their Hue lifestyles and the Hanoi migrants in Ho Chi Minh City who integrate into the local life and upgrade the culture of the newly developed land to a higher level, the Nghe migrants easily integrate into the life of their adopted home, thus diluting their “Nghe” cultural identity.

If Vietnam’s culture is a colourful picture, the Nghe culture, like that of the Kinh Bac, Quang, Hue and Thai Lands is one solid colour, contributing to the rich and diverse culture of Vietnam.

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