

THE WORSHIP OF ROYAL FEMALE DEITIES IN THE RED RIVER DELTA OF VIETNAM IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: A FUNCTIONALIST APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the worship of royal female deities in the Red River Delta within the context of contemporary social life, from the perspective of functionalist theory. This belief system is both historical - associated with the veneration of royal women who contributed to the nation - building and defense process - and spiritual, reflecting the community's aspirations for peace, prosperity, and happiness in the Northern Delta. By applying functionalist theory, the paper demonstrates that the worship of royal female deities not only fulfills the spiritual needs of individuals but also serves multiple social functions: fostering community cohesion, maintaining and transmitting traditional values, balancing spiritual life, regulating behavior, and creating harmony in social relations. The findings highlight the cultural and practical significance of preserving and promoting the worship of royal female deities as a distinctive intangible cultural heritage of the Vietnamese people.

Từ khóa: *The worship of female deities, royal female deities, Red River Delta, functionalist theory*

TÍN NGƯỠNG THỜ NỮ THẦN HOÀNG TỘC Ở ĐỒNG BẰNG SÔNG HỒNG TRONG XÃ HỘI ĐƯƠNG ĐẠI: TIẾP CẬN TỪ LÝ THUYẾT CHỨC NĂNG

TÓM TẮT

Bài viết nghiên cứu tín ngưỡng thờ nữ thần hoàng tộc ở đồng bằng sông Hồng trong đời sống xã hội đương đại, dưới góc nhìn lý thuyết chức năng. Tín ngưỡng này vừa mang tính lịch sử - gắn với việc tôn vinh những nữ nhân vật hoàng tộc trong tiến trình dựng nước và giữ nước - vừa thể hiện nhu cầu tâm linh, khát vọng an lành, hạnh phúc của cộng đồng cư dân châu thổ Bắc Bộ. Vận dụng lý thuyết chức năng, bài viết chỉ ra rằng tín ngưỡng thờ nữ thần hoàng tộc không chỉ đáp ứng nhu cầu tâm linh của cá nhân, mà còn thực hiện nhiều chức năng xã hội: cố kết cộng đồng, duy trì và truyền tải giá trị truyền thống, cân bằng đời sống tinh thần, điều chỉnh hành vi và tạo nên sự hài hòa trong quan hệ xã hội. Kết quả nghiên cứu góp phần khẳng định giá trị và ý nghĩa thực tiễn của việc bảo tồn, phát huy tín ngưỡng thờ nữ thần hoàng tộc như một di sản văn hóa tinh thần độc đáo của người Việt.

Keywords: *Tín ngưỡng thờ nữ thần, nữ thần hoàng tộc, đồng bằng sông Hồng, lý thuyết chức năng*

1. INTRODUCTION

The worship of royal female deities occupies an important position within Vietnam's traditional belief system, particularly in the Red River Delta-the cradle of wet-rice civilization for millennia. Associated with historical royal women such as Empress Dowager Y Lan, Princess Lieu Hanh, and other princesses and consorts who contributed to state governance and national defense, this form of worship affirms the historical role of women while leaving a lasting imprint on cultural memory through a dense network of temples, shrines, and sacred spaces. Over time, it has become an integral component of Vietnamese spiritual life and cultural identity.

From a functionalist perspective, the worship of royal female deities can be understood not merely as

a form of spiritual devotion but as a socio-cultural institution that fulfills multiple functions within the community. In contemporary society, despite profound transformations brought about by modernization and globalization, this belief system continues to demonstrate vitality through ritual practice and community-based festivals, serving as a space for spiritual expression and the reinforcement of collective consciousness.

This study examines the worship of royal female deities in the Red River Delta as a living folk belief embedded in contemporary cultural life. It seeks to illuminate how Vietnamese communities sustain, reinterpret, and transmit traditional spiritual values while adapting to social change, thereby revealing the enduring vitality of Vietnamese folk religion under modern conditions.

Methodologically, the paper combines documentary research with field surveys conducted at selected sites in the Red River Delta, including Hanoi, Ninh Binh, Bac Ninh, and Hai Phong. This integrated approach enables an analysis of the belief system both as a historical-cultural construct and as a set of lived practices in present-day community life.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. The worship of royal female deities in the Red River Delta

The term female deity (or goddess) refers to supernatural beings in female form associated with fertility, protection, and the well-being of human communities. In Vietnam, the worship of female deities has deep roots in early agricultural culture, particularly within the wet-rice societies of the Red River Delta, where women played essential economic and social roles. These conditions fostered belief systems centered on maternal symbolism in popular religion.

Over time, this system expanded to include royal female figures-empresses dowager, empresses, consorts, and princesses-who made notable contributions to dynastic governance or community life. Following their deaths, many were deified and venerated as National Mothers or Holy Mothers, symbolizing benevolence, protection, and moral virtue. This process gave rise to a distinctive belief system that integrates grassroots goddess worship with the sacralization of historical royal women.

As the political and cultural heartland of Vietnam for centuries, the Red River Delta became the primary region where this worship flourished. Numerous temples and shrines commemorate royal women whose merits shaped historical memory and local identity, with prominent figures such as Princess Lieu Hanh, Princess Tu Hoa, and Imperial Consort Y Lan occupying central positions in the regional pantheon.

2.2. Functionalist theory in the study of the worship of royal female deities in the Red River Delta

Functionalism, a major theoretical paradigm in twentieth-century anthropology and sociology, is primarily associated with A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski. Despite their differing emphases, both scholars conceptualized society as an integrated system in which cultural institutions perform specific functions that contribute to social stability and continuity. From this perspective, religion plays a central role in reinforcing shared values, regulating social relationships, and sustaining communal order.

Malinowski approached religion through the lens of

human needs, arguing that religious practices emerge to address fundamental biological, psychological, and social requirements, including the need for security, emotional reassurance, and social integration. Religious rituals thus function not only as expressions of belief but also as mechanisms for coping with uncertainty and maintaining psychological balance.

Applied to the worship of royal female deities in the Red River Delta, functionalist theory enables an interpretation of this belief system as a dynamic cultural institution. Rather than a residual tradition, it operates as a multifunctional mechanism that continues to shape social cohesion, moral orientation, cultural transmission, and community life in contemporary society.

2.3. Functions of the worship of royal female deities in the Red River Delta in contemporary society

2.3.1. Spiritual and psychological functions

The worship of female deities represents one of the earliest forms of human religiosity, rooted in the search for spiritual protection amid uncertainty. In Vietnam, this tradition developed within the wet-rice agricultural context of the Red River Delta, where the central role of women and traces of matrilineal culture shaped early perceptions of the sacred. Over time, royal women who contributed to governance and community life were deified, forming a distinctive spiritual pantheon within regional belief systems.

The ecological and historical conditions of the Red River Delta-characterized by vulnerability to floods, natural disasters, and warfare-cultivated a persistent sense of insecurity among local communities. Within this context, the worship of royal female deities addressed fundamental psychological needs for safety, protection, and emotional reassurance.

From a functionalist perspective, ritual practices associated with royal goddesses operate as mechanisms for alleviating anxiety and restoring psychological balance. Participation in communal rituals provides emotional comfort, reinforces inner stability, and enables individuals and communities to cope with uncertainty, thereby explaining the enduring resilience of this belief in contemporary cultural life.

2.3.2. Social function - community cohesion

From a functionalist perspective, the worship of royal female deities in the Red River Delta operates as a central cultural mechanism that reinforces social cohesion and sustains the continuity of village life. Through shared rituals, sacred narratives, and

collective participation in festivals, this belief system unites community members around common values and a shared sense of identity.

Historically, the Red River Delta's wet-rice economy and reliance on collective labor fostered strong communal bonds within the *làng xã*, the fundamental socio-cultural unit of Vietnamese rural society. In this context, the worship of tutelary deities—many of them royal women—functioned as an integrative institution through which communal norms, collective memory, and local identity were maintained and transmitted across generations.

State recognition of royal female deities through investiture and canonization further reinforced the linkage between political authority and local communities. Festival rituals, particularly communal processions and associated folk performances, provide occasions for collective participation that temporarily transcend social distinctions, strengthen interpersonal ties, and reaffirm a shared sense of belonging. Through these practices, the worship of royal female deities continues to sustain village solidarity and inter-community networks in contemporary northern Vietnam.

2.3.3. *Cultural and educational functions*

The worship of royal female deities in the Red River Delta plays an important role in preserving and transmitting traditional cultural values. Through its system of beliefs, rituals, and festivals, this form of worship functions as a repository of collective memory that contributes to shaping Vietnamese cultural identity and sustaining cohesion within village communities. It provides a cultural framework through which moral virtues and social norms are practiced, internalized, and transmitted across generations.

A central cultural-educational dimension of this belief system lies in the moral models embodied by royal female deities, who are associated with virtues such as filial piety, benevolence, loyalty, and wisdom. Figures such as Empress Dowager Y Lan are venerated not only for their historical roles but also as ethical exemplars, whose commemoration serves an instructive function within community life. Cultural transmission occurs primarily through family practices, communal rituals, and festivals, where historical narratives and local identity are collectively reaffirmed. Worship sites dedicated to royal female deities further operate as cultural repositories, preserving architectural, artistic, and symbolic traditions. Together, these practices enable the worship of royal female deities to function as a

cultural–educational system that sustains moral values, historical consciousness, and cultural continuity under contemporary conditions.

2.3.4. *Aesthetic and artistic function*

The worship of royal female deities in the Red River Delta embodies a rich system of aesthetic and artistic values expressed through architecture, sculpture, and ritual performance. Beyond its religious significance, this belief system functions as a cultural environment that preserves and nurtures traditional artistic creativity.

Architectural spaces dedicated to royal female deities reflect principles of harmony with the natural landscape, refined craftsmanship, and symbolic spatial organization, illustrating the evolution of vernacular aesthetics across historical periods. Sculptural representations of the goddesses are characterized by elegance, benevolence, and dignity, combining sacred symbolism with humanized artistic expression and historical memory.

Ritual performance—particularly *chầu văn* singing and *hầu đồng* spirit possession—constitutes a distinctive artistic domain in which music, costume, movement, and theatrical elements are integrated into a cohesive spiritual–aesthetic experience. Through these artistic forms, the worship of royal female deities operates as an enduring reservoir of aesthetic values, sustaining traditional craftsmanship and ritual arts within contemporary cultural life.

2.3.5. *Economic and tourism functions*

Beyond its spiritual and cultural significance, the worship of royal female deities also plays an important role in economic and tourism development, particularly within the context of contemporary cultural industries. Temples, shrines, and festivals associated with Mother Goddess worship have become focal points of cultural–spiritual tourism, attracting visitors who engage in ritual practices and experience local traditions.

The economic impact of this belief system is evident in the formation of festival-based cultural spaces that generate income through ritual services, offerings, local products, and related cultural activities. These practices contribute to local livelihoods while simultaneously reinforcing the visibility of traditional belief systems in public life.

At the same time, the expansion of tourism linked to Mother Goddess worship raises concerns regarding over-commercialization and the erosion of spiritual values. From a functionalist perspective, maintaining

a balance between economic exploitation and cultural preservation is essential to ensure that the worship of royal female deities continues to function as a sustainable cultural resource. When properly oriented, this belief system not only supports local economic development but also contributes to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage in contemporary Vietnamese society.

3. CONCLUSION

The worship of royal female deities in the Red River Delta constitutes a distinctive religious and cultural phenomenon that reflects the interconnection between historical memory, spiritual life, and communal values. Far from being a residual tradition, this belief system continues to function as a dynamic cultural institution that affirms the role of women in Vietnamese spiritual consciousness while sustaining collective identity within local communities.

Through its multiple functions-spiritual, social, cultural, artistic, and economic-the worship of royal female deities contributes to community cohesion, cultural transmission, and the continuity of traditional values under contemporary conditions. A functionalist analysis of this practice provides important theoretical insights into the adaptive capacity of Vietnamese folk beliefs in the context of modernization and globalization. At the same time, it offers a practical foundation for efforts to preserve and promote intangible cultural heritage in a sustainable manner.

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