

## SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CULT OF MAZU GODDESS IN THE SOUTHWEST OF VIETNAM<sup>1</sup>

***Abstract:** In the mind of the Vietnamese, each god or deity has his/her “duty” and function. The various gods and deities are related to different aspects of the human life, such as the Lady of the Realm (Bà Chúa Xứ) governs the land, the Mother Goddess of Water (Bà Thủy) governs the water, Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva saves the unfortunate, the Mazu Goddess (Bà Thiên Hậu) takes care of the sea and blesses all people, etc.. Ethnic in Vietnam worship various gods and deities with the hope that their prayers are heard and responded. The Chinese cult of the Mazu Goddess was absorbed by the Vietnamese in the Southwest in the process of co-existence. Consequently, a part of the Vietnamese built shrines for Mazu Goddess and carried out cultic activities. This article generalizes some features of shrines for Mazu Goddess in the Southwest of Vietnam.*

***Keywords:** Characteristics, shrine, Southwest, Mazu Goddess, Vietnamese.*

### **1. Overview of the Mazu Goddess cult of the Vietnamese in the Southwest**

In the cultural flow of the Vietnamese, the Southwest is a “late” cultural region, in comparison to many other regions, where the acculturation occurred between the indigenous people and the newcomers and they re-constructed the particular pattern of each ethnic community. The Vietnamese- status of the subject- actively opened up their minds and received new values that could be complemented for their culture after many centuries of migration

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through many lands with different cultural patterns. In other words, the process of acquiring and re-producing the Vietnamese culture in the Centre (in the period of Cochinchine) was a stepping-stone, a very meaningful one for the Vietnamese in the Southwest “absorbing and re-structuring many cultural and social practices there<sup>1</sup>. The social and cultural dimensions that Vietnamese received and reproduced in the Southwest including religion, performing arts and methods of livelihood. The most important source of absorbing phenomena related to *the simplicity of culture (tính chất sơ bạc)* after migration, reclamation and *active characteristic (tính chủ động)* of the Vietnamese in the reception of the new things.

The Mazu was a Goddess cult of community originated from Fujian. Then, it was expanded across the South China Sea Coast, Taiwan and the Yangtze River Delta zone. Finally, it was spread all over the world with about 6.000 shrines. The Mazu shrines were named such as Thien Hau palace, Thien Hau shrine, Ma Tổ shrine, Mother Goddess shrine, etc.. They were considered as the meeting place of people’s desires such as peace, happiness, accident avoidance, richness and prosperity of the local community.

Studying on symbols, Đinh Hồng Hải (2014) cited Pierce’s model to emphasize the interaction between the symbol and sign with the meaning field of the symbol (signified) in the cultural context of each specific community. The Mazu is a symbol with quite rich meaning, focused mainly on the meaning of the Sea Goddess, Blessing Goddess. However, the values of this cult changed depending on each community who worshiped the Mazu Goddess. The cult of Mazu was a part luggage of the Chinese ethnic group when they crossed the sea to Vietnam. After the process of co-existing in the South, it was propagated to a part of Vietnamese people. According to the English anthropologists in the late nineteenth century, cultural exchanges are “the process of transforming artifacts, customs and religious beliefs through communicating of societies with the different cultural traditions”<sup>2</sup>, while the American anthropologists stated that acculturation is a process where a culture adapts and influences the another culture by borrowing many of its features”<sup>3</sup>. In Vietnam, Ngô

Đức Thịnh confirmed “Cultural communication, in short, is the process where communities meet and, on that basis, receive their cultural values”<sup>4</sup>.

According to the above remarks, the Vietnamese people in the Southwest were open-minded, ready to receive and to restructure the spiritual life. It was a good condition for the cultural exchange among the ethnic groups in the region. In which, the cultural exchanges between the Vietnamese and the Chinese were the strongest because these two ethnic groups shared many similarities in ideological-cultural life. The process of cultural exchange between the Vietnamese and the Chinese through the Mazu worship forcefully occurred in the co-living areas of three communities: the Vietnamese, the Chinese, the Khmer. Therefore, the number of Mazu temples of the Vietnamese in particular, of the whole Southwest region is general, was the most numerous. Two typical areas are (1) the East Coast from Bến Tre, Trà Vinh to Sóc Trăng; and (2) lands along the trading routes connecting Ho Chi Minh City with the Southwest: Highway 1A, Măng Thít River, Tiền and Hậu Rivers system. Trà Vinh and Sóc Trăng (two sub-areas) were the most typical, where cultural exchanges and acculturation among three ethnic groups: the Vietnamese, the Chinese, the Khmer forcefully took place. Thus, the Mazu cult of the Vietnamese actively expressed. The existence and development of Khmer culture in two places (centered round the axis of Theravada Buddhism) indirectly produced the groundwork for the cultural diversity so the Chinese religion and customs also developed.

Therefore, the Mazu Goddess was also worshiped in the other worship places such as the Lady of the Realm shrine in Tân Châu, An Giang Province; the Mother Goddess of Water shrine in Cái Đôi Vàm Town, Phú Tân district and the Tam Vị shrine in Cái Nước Town, Cà Mau province; the Cửu Thiên Chúa Xứ Palace in the Bạc Liêu City, Bạc Liêu Province; the Tân Long Pagoda in Thanh Sơn commune, Trà Cú district, Trà Vinh province; the Lady of the Realm- Mã Châu Goddess shrine in Bãi Bắc Village, Lại Sơn Commune, Nam Du

Archipelago, Kiên Hải District, Kiên Giang Province<sup>5</sup> (fieldwork documents of the years 2014, 2015).

Coastal strip from Trà Vinh to Cà Mau Peninsula has been the most concentrated area of the Mazu worshipping establishments, they mainly belonged to the Chinese Chaozhou and Vietnamese people. Besides, the trade routes of Chợ Đệm Channel, Mỹ Tho River, Mang Thít River and Tiền- Hậu River system are also land of many Mazu temples.

According to incomplete statistics, the entire Southwest has 70 Mazu temples, including 55 temples of the Chinese, 15 temples built and managed religious activities by the Vietnamese. A total of 70 shrines are distributed as follows:

	<b>Location</b>	<b>Quantity</b>
1	An Giang	04
2	Bạc Liêu	07
3	Bến Tre	03
4	Cà Mau	08
5	Cần Thơ	01
6	Đồng Tháp	01
7	Kiên Giang	08
8	Long An	03
9	Sóc Trăng	16
10	Tiền Giang	02
11	Trà Vinh	11
12	Vĩnh Long	06
<b>Total</b>		<b>70</b>

15 temples built and managed religious activities by the Vietnamese are distributed as follows:

	<b>Name of Shrine</b>	<b>Address</b>
1	Miếu Thiên Hậu	Ward 1, Tân An City, Long An Province
2	Miếu Thiên Hậu	Ward 7, Tân An City, Long An Province
3	Miếu Thiên Hậu Vĩnh Mỹ	Ward Vĩnh Mỹ, Châu Đốc City, An Giang Province
4	Miếu Thiên Hậu	Ba Tri Town, Ba Tri District, Bến Tre Province
5	Miếu Thiên Hậu Tiệm	Tiệm Tôm Market, Ba Tri District,

	Tôm	Bến Tre Province
6	Hội quán Minh Hương	Vĩnh Long City, Vĩnh Long Province
7	Miếu Thiên Hậu Hòa Lộc	Hòa Lộc Market, Tam Bình District, Vĩnh Long Province
8	Miếu Bà Thiên Hậu	Vĩnh Bảo Commune, Châu Thành District, Trà Vinh Province
9	Miếu Chúa Xứ - Thiên Hậu	Hòa Thuận Commune, Châu Thành District, Trà Vinh Province
10	Miếu Bà Thiên Hậu	Cá Lóc Village, Định An Town, Trà Cú, Trà Vinh Province
11	Miếu Bà Thiên Hậu	Cầu Ngang Town, District Cầu Ngang, Trà Vinh Province
12	Miếu Thiên Hậu Huỳnh Kỳ	Vĩnh Hải Commune, Vĩnh Châu Town, Sóc Trăng Province
13	Miếu Bà Thiên Hậu	Hòa Đông Commune, Vĩnh Châu Town, Sóc Trăng Province
14	Thiên Hậu Thánh Mẫu Cung	Bạc Liêu Market, Bạc Liêu City, Bạc Liêu Province
15	Thiên Hậu Cung	Vĩnh Mỹ B Commune, Hòa Bình District, Bạc Liêu Province

## 2. The Mazu Shrine's characteristics of the Vietnamese in the Southwest

*Firstly*, the Mazu worship of the Vietnamese *is not associated with the social-cultural institutions and it does not pursue the search and preservation of cultural identity* as some of the Chinese Mazu temple in the region. According to a study by Liu Tiksang (2000), the Chinese shrine almost represents a social organization form of civil society: many economic, social, political, cultural activities mix with the spiritual institution. This is a typical feature of South China region (Hoa Nam).

In fact, the Chinese community in the Southwest does not have a vertical organization system, and so each of them is a “center” of the spiritual life of inhabitants in the area. The festival activities link spiritual institutions with economy, society, religious communities. Meanwhile, the majority of Mazu temples of the Vietnamese people in the Southwest region are small, spontaneous and purely spiritual,

although rituals of some temples are organized as communal house rule such as the Thiên Hậu Vĩnh Mỹ Shrine, Châu Đốc City, An Giang. Pilgrims are mostly the Vietnamese because the majority of these temples were built near a larger Mazu shrine managed by the Chinese which has greater influence.

Some Mazu shrines of the Vietnamese had many similarities with the communal house of the Vietnamese in the South... In the rituals, these shrines were used rulers of the Nguyen dynasty to organize the main ceremony, along with folk activities such as singing, dancing. They were different from some of the Chinese Mazu temples in the area with the ancient rituals such as “cutting tongue, pasting amulet”, “hot oil bath”<sup>6</sup>, etc.. The Mazu shrines of the Vietnamese only had singing, dancing folk songs to cheer the gods.

*Secondly*, some Mazu temples of the Vietnamese in the Southwest moved on the axis of the Mother Goddesses worship of the Vietnamese in the South, including the trend of Vietnamisation with the traces of the “Tam phủ”. They were called shrines (miếu or miễu) like Miếu Thiên Hậu, miếu Bà Thiên Hậu, miễu Bà Thiên Hậu, etc. Miếu Bà Chúa Xứ - Thiên Hậu (Lady of the Realm- the Mazu shrine) in Đầu Bờ village, Hòa Thuận Commune, Châu Thành District, Trà Vinh Province is a typical case of the “recombination” the symbol of the Mazu Goddess in Vietnamese culture. Bà Thiên Hậu was called Bà Chúa Xứ (the statue is Bà Thiên Hậu, the ceremony day is the Thiên Hậu’s birthday, on 23 March- lunar calendar), the mother of the country, Bà Chúa Xứ Núi Sam. The second case is Miếu Bà Thủy (Mother Goddess of Water shrine) in Cái Đôi Vàm Town, Phú Tân District, Cà Mau province worshiped the statues of the three Mother Goddess in the order from left to right: Bà Thủy - Bà Thượng (Thiên Hậu, Nam Hải) - Bà Chúa Xứ - Three goddesses represent the three layers of space as Water - Heaven - Earth. According to our study result, Bà Thượng (Bà Thiên Hậu) holds the *Heaven* position, while the two other Goddesses, Bà Thủy keeps the *Land* position, Bà Chúa Xứ holds the *Humankind*s position. As being located in the waterfront of Ca Mau and attached to the sea, the shrine was called *Miếu Bà Thủy*, although the center of the shrine was the statue of Bà Thượng (Bà Thiên Hậu), was not Bà Thủy<sup>7</sup>.

Thirdly, as a small branch of the Mother Goddesses cult in the South, the Mazu worship of the Vietnamese in the Southwest has been *indigenization* with the Vietnamese style of temples' architecture and decoration. It is an important data to prove the sociable characteristic of Vietnamese people in the Southwest in the indigenization of others culture in order to enrich their cultural traditions. The Mazu statues of the Vietnamese generally had two styles. The Vietnamese style showed her symbol as a gracious Mother Goddess, she was sometimes an old woman, sometimes very youthful. The second style was formal, she was a Queen in the Heaven (wore an imperial coronet like Ming dynasty's style in China). The second group of statues were usually brought from China or the Chinese community in the area.

Generally, the Mazu temples, built by the Vietnamese, were not completely similar the architectural style of the Chinese, but they liked the architectural style of the communal house, the shrine of the Vietnamese in the South and more or less marked by the Western architecture. The total of 15 Mazu temples of the Vietnamese can be divided into three main styles. The first one is a large-scale shrine with the form resembled the communal house in the South such as the Chúa Xứ - Thiên Hậu Hòa Thuận shrine, Bà Thiên Hậu Vĩnh Bảo shrine (Trà Vinh), Thiên Hậu Huỳnh Kỳ shrine (Sóc Trăng), Minh Hương Assembly Hall in Vĩnh Long City, Bà Thiên Hậu shrine in Cá Lóc Village (Trà Vinh) and Thiên Hậu Tiệm Tôm shrine (Bến Tre). These shrines had a large space structure with some decoration on the roof or in the front (exception the group of four sacred animals and carp); On the other hand, the structure and arrangement of altars was quite similar the communal house, including the main altar of Mazu. The two sides dedicated the other gods and soldiers.

The second one was an architectural mixture of the communal house and house of the Vietnamese in the Southwest. A typical shrine can be mentioned such as Thiên Hậu Vĩnh Mỹ in Châu Đốc City, An Giang province. The structure of the shrine is basically a one chamber house with two- roofs (brown-red roofing tiles), three doors in the front. The roofs were decorated with dragon and phoenix, the pillars were decorated with the Hue royal pattern. The shrine consisted the

space of religious activities and the main sanctum in the end of the chamber. This shrine was a place for community activities of people in Châu Đốc, so it was a typical communal temple.

The third one was small shrines which were common in rural areas of the Southwest. These shrines usually had a small room. The architecture of the third group was generally quite simple (exception Thiên Hậu shrine in Ward 1, Tân An City (Long An) and Thiên Hậu shrine in Bạc Liêu Market that had decorative patterns on the pillars. And Thiên Hậu shrine in Ba Tri Town (Bến Tre) attached to Long Đức temple<sup>8</sup>. The shrines mostly had family scale characteristic, although local people still had a management board but it was quite loose.

As mentioned above, in comparison with the style of worship and shrines of the Vietnamese, the Mazu worship and shrines of the Cantonese Chinese showed *the respect* through the Ming dynasty's rules, the architectural and artistic styles were formal; the Chaozhou Chinese showed *the flexibility* and talent for fine arts and folk architectural art; while the style of Fujian, Hainan's shrines were located between these two poles. The architectural style and art of the Vietnamese shrines were basically complied with the Nguyễn rules.

The architectural structure of some Mazu shrines of the Vietnamese were similar to Mahayana Buddhism such as Thiên Hậu shrine in Ba Tri Town (Bến Tre Province), Assembly Hall of Minh Hương in Vĩnh Long City, Thiên Hậu Hòa Lộc shrine in Tam Bình District, Vĩnh Long Province or the phenomenon of co-worship Thiên Hậu in Tân Long Pagoda, Trà Vinh Province. The most common sign of Thiên Hậu shrine is that a Buddhist temple complex or a Buddhist temple dedicated to the Buddha in the front, the Mazu at the back" (tiền Phật hậu Thánh). During the celebration of Mazu, these shrines often offered vegetarian food and ceremonies performed by monks and nuns (fieldwork data in 2015). In addition, in some temples, the worshiped subjects were relatively diverse such as Confucius, Guan Gong, Guan Yin, Mother Goddess of Land, Lady of the Realm, 12 midwives, etc..

Fourthly, if the Mazu cult of the Vietnamese could be referenced to the Hierarchy of needs theory of Abraham Maslow (1908 - 1970),



the Mazu worship of the Vietnamese in the Southwest has *limited function spectrum* (có phổ chức năng hạn chế hơn). If the Mazu worship of the Chinese in the area spread the functions: (1) Physical needs (settlement, career development), (2) The needs of being protected, peace of mind (security, peace), (3) The needs of communicating (connecting countrymen to Association, so many Mazu shrines were also Assembly Halls), (4) The needs of being recognized, respected (to be treated equally like the other ethnic groups), and (5) The need of expressing the Chinese cultural identity (sacred and secular) while this cult of the Vietnamese people centered the needs of protection, peace of mind, and spirituality (sacred). Believers who visited these shrines were mostly residents of the area, so the value and influence of these shrines was low in terms of scale (communal level) while the shrines of the Chinese was at communal level if they were in rural areas, some shrines reach the regional influence scale (sub-regional level<sup>9</sup>) or (regional level<sup>10</sup>) if they were in city, town or traffic focal axes.

### 3. Conclusion

The Mazu worshiping establishments of the Vietnamese in the Southwest, a simple spiritual form in comparison to the Chinese Mazu temple system which is considered as a kind of “museum” of indigenous architecture, fine art, folk sculpture as well as the artistic and cultural identity of the ethnic group. In a comparative relationship, the folk architecture and art of the Vietnamese Mazu temple system in the Southwest is generally spontaneous with sacred rituals (the sanctity, power and mystery of the supernatural world) while the Mazu worship system of the Chinese combined the *sacred and secular values*.

For the Vietnamese people, the major ethnicity in the Southwest, the process of absorbing coincided with the process of “restructuring”, so the architecture and sculpture in the Vietnamese Mazu shrines was vietnamisation, it became close to the Mahayana Buddhism (especially the worship of Quan Yin Buddha), was similar to the temple or the communal house in the South. A long with the tendency of cultural integration, the Mazu cult of the Vietnamese in the

Southwest was gradually separated from the one of the Chinese and integrated into the worship of Mother Goddesses - a very popular religion there. /.

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#### NOTES:

- 1 Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ (2015), “Dấu tích tục thờ Tam phủ trong tín ngưỡng thờ Thiên Hậu của người Việt vùng Tây Nam Bộ” (Traces of the Three Palaces worship in the Mazu cult of the Vietnamese in the Southwest), *Văn hóa Dân gian*, số 6 (162): 24-34.
- 2 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Inc 1768/1985, *The New Encyclopædia Britannica*, by Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc, U.S.A: 57.
- 3 Trường Đại học Khoa học Xã hội và Nhân văn 2008: 107.
- 4 Ngô Đức Thịnh (1984), “Người Khmer đồng bằng sông Cửu Long là thành viên của cộng đồng các dân tộc Việt Nam” (Khmer people in Cửu Long river Delta are member of ethnic communities in Vietnam), *Nghiên cứu Lịch sử*, số 6: 39.
- 5 Phan Thị Yến Tuyết (2014), “Tín ngưỡng thờ mẫu và nữ thần từ chiều kích văn hóa biển của vùng biển đảo Kiên Hải, Kiên Giang” (The cult of Mother Goddesses and Goddesses worship through oceanic cultural dimension of Kiên Hải Island, Kiên Giang), *Tuyển tập Việt Nam học*, Nxb. Đại học Quốc gia Tp. Hồ Chí Minh.
- 6 Chặng hạn hệ thống miếu tại Cầu Kè, Trà Cú tỉnh Trà Vinh, TT. Ngan Dừa tỉnh Bạc Liêu, v.v..
- 7 Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ (2015), “Dấu tích tục thờ Tam phủ trong tín ngưỡng thờ Thiên Hậu của người Việt vùng Tây Nam Bộ” (Traces of the Three Palaces worship in the Mazu cult of the Vietnamese in the Southwest), *Văn hóa Dân gian*, số 6 (162): 24-34.
- 8 A Buddhist temple was built in 1967 in the land of Mazu shrine (fieldwork data 2015).
- 9 Miếu Thiên Hậu Tp. Cà Mau, miếu Thiên Hậu TX. Vĩnh Châu tỉnh Sóc Trăng, miếu Thiên Hậu Tp. Trà Vinh, miếu Thiên Hậu Tp. Sa Đéc, miếu Thiên Hậu Tp. Vĩnh Long, v.v..
- 10 Miếu Tuệ Thành, quận 5, Tp. Hồ Chí Minh; miếu Bà Hẹ - Thiên Hậu Cung Thất Sơn, Tịnh Biên, An Giang.

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19. Fieldwork data in Southwest in 2013, 2014, 2015.