

Quan Am Pagoda Festival

Vu Hong Thuat

Ph.D, Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences

Email: vuhongthuat@gmail.com

Nguyen Thanh Sinh

Ph.D, Duy Tan University

Email: thanhsinhhue@gmail.com

Received 27 April 2019; published 5 November 2019

Abstract: *The belief of worshipping Quan Am (Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva) plays an important role in Vietnamese cultural life. While the statue of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva is worshipped in most pagodas in Viet Nam, the festival is only celebrated by the one in Ngu Hanh Son district (Da Nang province) on February 19th of the lunar calendar. The festival which consists of two parts: the religious ceremony and festival itself, reflects the association between the Buddhist culture and folk beliefs in the Central region of Viet Nam. In addition, it also performs certain social functions.*

Keywords: Festival, Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva Pagoda, Social Functions

Foreword

Religions and beliefs are a form of social activities, individual and collective. So far, a pagoda in Viet Nam has been always holding an important position in the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people. This is not a site of worship for religious and belief activities but also a place where the masses deposit their trust and aspirations in the Great Buddha as a way to direct people to the good, stay away from the bad and strive for a safe and sound society. Therefore, a pagoda becomes a site for spiritual activities of the community.

Quan The Am (also Quan Am: Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva) Pagoda is

located at the Thuy Son Mount within the tourist complex of Ngu Hanh Son, Da Nang. The festival at the Pagoda reflects Buddhist cultural ideology and also folk beliefs of the Vietnamese people in the central part of Viet Nam. Besides, the festival also has social functions in various aspects in order to promote sustainable socio-economic and cultural development in the region¹.

¹ To gather data for this article, we ourselves took part in the Quan Am Pagoda Festival in 2018 and 2019 to observe and participate in rituals and activities as well as conduct in-depth interviews (IDI) with some monks and Buddhist followers there.

1. A brief introduction of Quan Am Pagoda

The tourist complex of Ngu Hanh Son consists of six mounts emerging in a coastal plain, namely Kim Son (Metal), Moc Son (Wood), Thuy Son (Water), Tho Son (Soil), Duong Hoa Son (Positive Fire), and Am Hoa Son (Negative Fire). Emperor Minh Mang (ruling 1820-1840), exploiting the principle of Confucianism, named the group of mounts “Ngũ Hành Sơn” (Mounts of Five Elements), while local residents in Quang Nam Province call it “Núi Non Nước”. *Among six mounts at “Núi Non Nước”, Am Hoa Son and Duong Hoa Son stand adjoining each other, so since long time ago, people call them with a common name Hoa Son (Mount of Fire). The Viet people in the central part, influenced by the Yiching (Book of Changes), combine six mounts into five, representing five basic elements: metal, wood, water, fire and soil* (IDI with Thich Hue Vinh, the managing monk of Quan Am Pagoda).

Thanks to its geographic location and landscape, Ngu Hanh Son was surveyed by a number of venerable Buddhist monks who founded there pagodas to reach enlightenment and bring Buddhist light to the masses, for the sake of national property and people's happiness. There is a grotto located deep in the Mount Thuy Son, facing to the Co Co River. Previously, the region was neighboring to the Han River and faced the sea to the southeast, so monks and local people mainly travelled by boat. People lived on agriculture, fishery and stone-carving. After 1975, the offices of many agencies and organizations were built here, igniting a new wave of migration to the region. At present, Ngu Hanh Son

District borders the sea to the east, Cam Le and Hoa Vang Districts to the west, Son Tra and Hai Chau Districts to the north, and Dien Ban Town (Quang Nam) to the south. The total natural area of Ngu Hanh Son is about 3,911 ha, with a population of over 43,000 people (Ngu Hanh Son District People's Committee, <https://nguhanhson.danang.gov.vn>).

Located on the main axis of transport linking Da Nang City and Hoi An Town, Ngu Hanh Son District is endowed with a propitious position, natural advantages, and good infrastructure in favor of developing religious tourism, convalescence tourism, mountain climbing, grotto discovery, and visiting the Buddhist Museum. It is possible to say that the tourist site of Ngu Hanh Son is a masterpiece in terms of natural landscape. In 2018 only, the site received over 1.99 million turns of tourists, including 1.2 million turns of foreigners, increasing 34% against 2017. Being aware of the site's potential for culture and tourism development, on 24 December 2018, the Prime Minister signed Decision 1820/QĐ-TTg recognizing Ngu Hanh Son a special national-level heritage site (<https://baodanang.vn>).

In terms of origin, Quan The Am (Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva) was a son of King Vo Tranh Niem. He followed Buddhism and reached the level of Bodhisattva, assisting and coaching the masses to overcome sufferings in daily life. Therefore, the name Quan The Am Bo Tat means “a person who listens to living beings' cries from the world of suffering and gives a hand to them”, like a kind mother protecting her children. Local

people also call her Quan The Am the Kind Mother. “According to folk stories in Da Nang, Quan The Am appeared in the peninsula of Son Tra to save fishermen from the Deluge, so this site was named the Ground of Buddha (Bai But). She also appeared to allow Buddhist monks residing on the mounts of Ngu Hanh Son to establish a pagoda named after her, Quan The Am” (IDI with Thich Hue Vinh, the managing monk of Quan Am Pagoda). In Vietnamese pagodas, there are a lot of her appearances, such as Quan Am Lo Thien (Avalokitesvara appearing in the sky), Quan Am Thi Kinh (Thi Kinh the Avalokitesvara), Quan Am Nam Hai (Avalokitesvara of the Southern Sea), Quan Am Cuu Kho (Avalokitesvara the Saver), Quan Am Thien Thu Thien Nhan (Avalokitesvara with thousand arms and thousand eyes), etc. At Quan Am Pagoda, she stands on a lotus flower, with a willow branch in her right hand and a vase of sweet-dew in the left hand, the image of Amida Buddha atop her head.

Next to the pagoda is a big grotto, with a statue of Quan Am standing on a dragon, reminding the story she crosses the wavy sea to save people in danger. In 1956, late venerable monk Thich Phap Nhan discovered this grotto. According to the text inscribed on a stele in the pagoda, in 1957 monk Thich Phap Nhan established the pagoda next to the grotto’s mouth and named it *Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát tự* (the Pagoda of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva), in order to commemorate the “predestined chance” of discovering the grotto with the statue of Avalokitesvara. Because the Chinese characters “quán” and “quan” were the

same, with the same meaning (“listen”) and the Viet never take a 4-character name for a pagoda, *Quán Thế Âm tự* was shortened as “Quán Âm tự” or “chùa Quan Âm”¹.

2. Brief history of the festival

Annually, Quan Am Pagoda organizes three big festivals (in lunar calendar), namely the 19th day of the 2nd month (birthday of Avalokitesvara), the 19th day of the 6th month (Avalokitesvara reached the peak of Buddhism), and the 19th day of the 9th month (Avalokitesvara went into a religious life). Among these three occasions, the birthday ceremony of Avalokitesvara (19th day of the 2nd month) (hereinafter called Quan Am Pagoda festival) is the most important.

The Quan Am Pagoda festival was organized for the first time in 1960, on the inauguration of the statue Bo Tat Quan The Am placed in Hoa Nghiem Grotto in the Mount Thuy Son. The festival opened a turning point in the history of Buddhism in the central part of Viet Nam: pagoda festivals were organized. The pagoda festivals reflect Buddhist followers’ trust in Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva and express that local people’s demands for religions, beliefs and festivals are an indispensable part of their life. However, due to historical upheavals, the organization of the Quan Am Pagoda festival was interrupted for a long time.

In 1991, the festival was restored, bringing about a new form of Buddhist cultural festival combined with native folk beliefs and creating a special festive atmosphere attracting a large number of local people and tourists.

¹ In this article, we took the name Quan Am Pagoda.

In 2000, the Quan Am Pagoda festival was selected by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism as one of 15 festivals in the program “Welcome Destination in the New Millennium of the Nation”. To receive an increasing number of visitors to the national-level festival, the Pagoda Management Board built a park of holy relics in front of the pagoda for conducting ceremonies and broadened Su Van Hanh Road. Recently, the festival has been organized annually, lasting for three days, from the 17th to 19th day of the second lunar month, in which the 19th day is the main festival. The festival is an occasion for the pagoda to pray for “the nation’s property and people’s happiness” and “a peaceful world”. This is also a chance for people to consolidate unity, feel happy, and strive for genuineness-goodness-beauty on the basis of national and regional cultural identities.

3. Sequence of the festival

The Quan Am Pagoda festival is *a combination of religious aspects and indigenous beliefs and culture*. It is one of 15 national-level festivals attracting a large number of Buddhist pilgrims and visitors (Nguyen Thi Hong Dao, 2018: 2).

The festival consists of two major parts: the most important *ritual* is the procession of palanquin and the *festival* with numerous cultural activities.

Preparations for the festival start in early 2nd lunar month, participated by the pagoda and local government. *The festival organizing board found several subcommittees: The Steering Board is responsible for the whole organization work; the Organizing Board directly designs the festival program; subcommittees are assigned with certain*

work. This is quite different from the organization of other temple/pagoda/communal house festivals in the North and South of Viet Nam (discussed and organized by the local communities, without the government’s intervention) (IDI with superior monk Thich Phuong Tam, Quan Am Pagoda).

On the 17th day of the 2nd month, the festival starts with an opening ceremony of the village flag festival, followed by the praying ritual to hoist Buddhist pennons and flags; the opening of exhibitions on photos, calligraphy and paintings; the opening of the Buddhist Culture Museum for free visit; the folk art performance (*hò hát Bài chòi*); an incense-burning ceremony in commemoration of Princess Huyen Tran at the Shrine of Madame in Su Van Hanh Road...

Especially, in the 2019 festival, the Organizing Board invited a delegation of Buddhists and representatives of the Society for Immaterial Cultural Preservation “Thủy Lục Trai” from Incheon City (Republic of Korea) to the pagoda where they took part in the Nabijum ritual in the 17th afternoon of the 2nd lunar month. This is a Buddhist ceremony recognized as the Immaterial Cultural Heritage of the RoK, depicting the religious and cultural life of Korean Buddhist monks in the motto of “earthen life and religious life are the one”. The Nabijum ritual attracts a lot of Buddhist monks and nuns, followers, visitors and tourists.

The ceremony to hoist Buddhist pennons (*Lễ thượng phan*) is the rite to plant and raise Buddhist pennons on a 10m pole. Atop the pole is the “*bảo cái*” (valuable thing), a circle made of yellow cloth, embroidered

with the motif of “two dragons looking to the Sun”, similar to a broad-brimmed conical hat. In the center is *tràng phan*, a piece of cloth (60cm wide, 9m long) of five colors (blue, red, lilac, yellow, white) representing five basic colors and five precepts of Buddhism.

On the 18th day, there is the procession of incense sticks: Being directed by an officiating priest, flag bearers, drummers and gong players, Buddhist monks and followers, local residents, and visitors gather in a procession to carry the palanquin of Princess Huyen Tran to the pagoda for the festival. Arriving the pagoda, the Organizing Board burns incense sticks and asks Her to worship the Great Buddha and enjoy the festival. At the 18th night, Buddhist monks and followers recite prayers for property and peace, then the managing monk lights a torch with a flickering candle in the main altar in order to start the ceremony of bringing the light around the pagoda. This torch is used to light other torches or “flower lantern” candles, implying that Avalokitesvara’s light shows the way for living beings in the saha to get out of sufferings and reach the bank of enlightenment (*giác ngộ*), so that intelligence is enriched; mercy, mutual assistance and affection are pervasive to the world. Following the procession of light are palanquin bearers, lion-unicorn dancers, dragon dancers. All of these bring to the festival night a fanciful and sacred ambiance. Apart from those ceremonies, at the night of the 18th day, monks and sorcerers also conduct the spring cult (*tế xuân*) to present votive offerings to gods of mountain, soil and water at village shrines to pray for people’s happiness. In this ceremony,

elders from Hoa Hai and Hoa Quy Wards, in ceremonial dress, holding flags, pennons and lanterns, together with the team of musical instrument players and drummers, join the ceremony. The elders burn incense sticks and read votive petitions to invite gods to the pagoda to join the festival and bless local people. When mentioning gods’ names, the officiating priest and sorcerers must utter in a subdued voice (“*khẩn âm*”) in order to show respect to the gods. After the rituals of spring worship, the parade of elders move to the bank of Cau Bien River to carry out the opening ceremony of the “lantern festival”. Then, from the Quan Am Pagoda, they bring lanterns, torches and the palanquin of Avalokitesvara through residential wards to the Non Nước stone-carving village and tourist site before returning the grand stand in front of the pagoda, completing a route of nearly 3 km long. When the parade arrives, families along the route present votive offerings on the tables in front of their houses/gates and burn incense sticks to welcome Avalokitesvara and pray for blessings, good lucks and contentment...

In the early morning of the 19th day of the 2nd lunar month, all Buddhist monks and followers jointly conduct the ceremony of reading prayers (“*khai kinh*”) to pray for the nation’s property, people’s happiness, good weather, and bumper crops; giving lectures on Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva’s honorable desire of assisting living beings in misfortune. The ceremony aims at eulogizing Her merit and pray for the country’s property and peace. The next ceremony in the pagoda’s front courtyard is the ritual of opening the altar and distributing

relief (“*trai đàn chân tế*”) to ten categories of forsaken soul (*thập loại chúng sinh cô hồn*), including martyrs, soldiers who died in the battlefield, those who died of traffic accidents, those who drowned in rivers and sea, and Buddhist followers’ ancestors. In this ritual, prayers are read by high-ranking and pious Buddhist monks in line with Buddhist rites.

Especially, at about 10AM of the 19th day, the procession of an incarnation of Avalokitesvara (played by a young girl) is the most important and holy ritual of the festival. Going first is the team of flag bearers, followed by drummers, gong players, priests, thurifers, carriers of Avalokitesvara’s palanquin, Buddhist monks, and pilgrims. Members of the palanquin-carrying team wear traditional festive costumes, showing their respect and decency. The procession departs from the Quan Am Pagoda, going along Su Van Hanh Road to the Cau Bien Wharf where the palanquin is embarked a boat to navigate around the Co Co River before returning the pagoda. This ceremony implies that Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva is going around in the river/sea to discover, save and assist fishermen. Representatives of the Organizing Board take turns burning incense-sticks and candles in her palanquin, keeping them from dying out. *“The lamp/candle light is the symbol of the light from Avalokitesvara who appears to bless all participants with good health, safety and good fortunate. If an unexpected incident takes place in the pagoda or the candle in Avalokitesvara’s palanquin is out, it means a danger or unlucky happening warned by Her in advance”* (IDI with Mr. Nguyen Ba

Trung, 55 years old, Hoa Hai Ward, Ngu Hanh Son District).

During the festive days, there are always rounds of reciting Buddhist prayers, reading orations to the gods, presenting six votive offerings (incense-sticks, flowers, tea, fruits, truncated cone-shaped rice flour cookie, fresh water) at noon and in the afternoon, chaired by an officiating priest.

As the anniversary of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva’s birthday, the Quan Am Pagoda festival is an event of folk beliefs rather than of commemoration. This is also appropriate to the outlook that “beliefs are actually religions” (Nguyen Thi Hien, 2012: 24).

During the festival, there are numerous cultural activities, art performances and sports imbued with national and local cultural nuances: making up the young girl as Avalokitesvara, singing folk songs, performing classical opera, playing human chess, calligraphy, making watercolor paintings, stone carving, performing dances of four supernatural animals, floating lanterns in the river, boat-race, gastronomic contest, introducing the Ngu Hanh Son complex... Depending on the annual budget, the Organizing Board will decide specific activities.

In 2019, with an expense granted by the government of Da Nang City for the festival, the Quan Am Pagoda organized a series of events before the main festival (16th day of the 2nd lunar month): opening an exhibition of monk-artist Thich Viet Thanh’s Zen paintings and photos (he is a Deputy Director of the Managing Committee and the Chief of the Faith Propagation Department of the Central

Buddhist Church of Viet Nam in Da Lat); making works of calligraphy and paintings; holding a poetic-music gala; introducing the debut of the special magazine *Diệu Âm lễ hội 2019* (The Festival 2019's Miracle Echo); performance of Zen martial arts by Korean monks.

In the 2019 festival, representatives of many Avalokitesvara Temples from Myanmar, India, Republic of Korea, Japan... attended the event and cultural exchange (making calligraphic works, exhibiting Buddhist paintings, performing martial arts, joining Zen meditation courses, giving lectures on legends and titles of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, etc.).

4. Social functions of the Festival

The Quan Am Pagoda festival not only shows cultural values and traditional customs of local residents but also reflects some social functions. Ceremonies conducted during the festival are imbued with specific characteristics of local practices and culture (Vu Hong Thuat, 2014: 8). From the angle of religion and belief, the festival's rituals and activities have the major social functions as follows:

* *Consolation*

The worship of Avalokitesvara as the main Buddha in the Quan Am Grotto and the organization of the main festival on the 19th day of the 2nd lunar month are a process of sanctification developed from polytheistic beliefs into a Buddhist festival for the sake of the nation's property and people's happiness. The ceremonies and festive activities as mentioned above all reflect a faith in Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva and the aspiration for "the nation's property and people's happiness". Through participating

and observing the festival in 2018 and 2019, we realized that, though the pagoda already prepared all votive offerings and recited Buddhist prayers for the sake of all participants, local Buddhist followers and pilgrims still presented a lot of offerings at the pagoda with the hope of being blessed by the goddess. "*The birthday of Avalokitesvara is celebrated by all pagodas throughout the country. However, we made a pilgrimage to the Quan Am Pagoda because there are pagodas in all five mounts, forming a sacred land. At the same time, we could take part in numerous Buddhist cultural activities at these pagodas in order to pray for good health, happiness and peace in the daily life*" (IDI with Mrs Nguyen Thi Tuyet, 42 years old, Hoi An, Quang Nam).

* *Remembrance*

Apart from the adoration to Avalokitesvara, pilgrims also show their respect to other gods and saints of folk beliefs. Conducting rituals, reading votive speeches, expressing gratitude to the Buddha and gods after each and every ceremony... are evidences of thanks to Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva; Princess Huyen Tran; the patron saint of stone carving; founder-monks of pagodas within Ngu Hanh Son complex; gods of the local region, tutelary gods, and ancestors who reclaimed fresh grounds to establish new villages, encouraged their descendants to overcome challenges, work hard, support each other for the sake of a happy and comfortable life and a peaceful society.

Each and every ritual of worship during the Quan Am Pagoda festival implies that local practices are already mixed with Buddhist culture. Local residents' donation of votive offerings to Avalokitesvara, who

is worshipped right in their houses, to other gods at temples and shrines, and to wandering souls is one of their actions of remembrance and gratitude to predecessors - those who already reclaimed new lands, founded new settlements, explored mountains and discovered grottos, built pagodas and towers, spread Buddhism in order to lead people to genuineness-goodness-beauty. Religious faith and festival help to remind people of the origin, so that they will educate themselves and strive for a prosperous and happy life.

** Education*

The Quan Am Pagoda festival attracts not only Buddhist monks, nuns, followers but also tourist at home and abroad. The pagoda and local people, relying on standards of behavior and religious faiths, select members of the palanquin-carrying team, the organizing board, committees of receiving guests and donations... Becoming members of the officiation team, music band, incense stick-offering team, and festival attendants is an honor for local residents.

In the context of globalization, international integration and rapid urbanization in the region of Ngu Hanh Son, the Quan Am Pagoda festival plays an educational role and also an invisible measure for improving behavior of individuals in families and communities, of local residents and tourists. The unity between Buddhist monks residing in pagodas and local people/government in organizing the festival is a factor of nurturing good traditions.

** Community consolidation*

The Quan Am Pagoda festival is a kind of community-based religious activities. Each

and every participants to the festival tries to show their respect and responsibility to the Buddha and gods, with a hope that the latter would bless them with good health, happiness and fortunate.

The participation of a large number of local people also reflects the community coherence. During the festival, most of local people, including those working far away from their homeland, try to come back and contribute money for organizing the festival or repairing pagodas. People from neighboring provinces, domestic and foreign tourists to Da Nang also take part in the festival to have a better insight in local traditional culture and help to enhance community consolidation. *“Through the festival, we will try best to enrich people’s cultural life, bring into play many traditional cultural values of the nation, and develop new moral standards”* (IDI with Senior Monk Thich Hue Vinh, Quan Am Pagoda).

Conclusion

The Quan Am Pagoda festival helps to enrich the nation’s treasure of cultural heritages, forming a multicolored panorama of Vietnamese festivals, with abundant rituals and ceremonies imbued with both Buddhist and folk cultural identities found in the central part of Viet Nam. It satisfies local people’s demands for spiritual culture. The Quan Am Pagoda festival shows belief/religious elements and also traits of the modern life. This is a good cultural feature of the festival, helping to stimulate Buddhist followers’ mercifulness and inclination to the good, boosting the Buddhism-nation association.

The Quan Am Pagoda festival has a great influence not only on the treasure of

Buddhist cultural heritages at home but also Buddhism in other Asian and Southeast Asian countries. This is a turning point in connecting Buddhist culture in Viet Nam and in the world in the context of global integration. The festival is an occasion for the exchange of Buddhist cultures in the region in honoring the Great Buddha's progressive ideas which can be applied in the daily life to build a peaceful and prosperous world □

References

1. Nguyen Thi Hong Dao (2018), *Festival at Quan Am Pagoda*, Bachelor-level Graduation Thesis, Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, Duy Tan University, Da Nang.
2. Nguyen Thi Hien (2012), "Religion from a View of Anthropology", *Religious Studies*, No. 10 (112), pp. 24-33.
3. Vu Hong Thuat (2014), "Festival at Trang Vi Communal House", *Folk Culture Studies*, No. 1 (151), pp. 1-10.
4. Ngu Hanh Son District People's Committee, *Introduction of Ngu Hanh Son District*, <https://nguhanhson.danang.gov.vn/gioi-thieu>, accessed on 01 July 2019.
5. *Quan The Am Festival in Da Nang*, <https://danangfantasticity.com/tin-tuc/le-hoi-quan-the-am-da-nang-2019.html>