

DOCTORAL THESIS IN BRIEF

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Major: Cultural studies

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Nam Dinh is one of the centers of the Belief in the Mother Goddesses of Four Realms (Tứ phủ) and Saint Tran. Going into trance ritual performance in Nam Dinh province is a form of folk ritual performance that has been formed and developed for a long time. In the process of cultural exchange and acculturation, ritual performance has absorbed the cultural quintessence of the regions to create their own richness and diversity, which is both positive and challenging causing impurities in content, form and performance. The thesis is an in-depth study of ritual performance in Nam Dinh from a cultural perspective, which has identified the cultural values of traditional ritual performance and the changes of presenting ritual performance in Nam Dinh today. At the same time, it assesses the change in the constituent components, determines the interaction between tradition and present, and the level of change, thereby making assessment on the cause of change and the problems posed for presenting rituals.

Apart from introduction, conclusion, reference, the thesis consists of four chapters.

Chapter 1 is devoted to *literature review, theoretical basis and overview of the traditional ritual performance*.

From the author's perspective, performing

the ritual plays an important role in the worshipping Mother Goddesses of Three Realms (Tam phủ). It is the rite of inducing a trance in mediums, which is the re-enactment of the saints through the art of spiritual performance in order to order, give blessings and respond to the prayers in accordance with a certain rule and order. Performing rituals was formed and developed from the festival of worshipping the God of the village - The village's tutelary god, the festival of worshipping the Father God - Saint Tran (Father God Festival), the festival of worshipping the Mother Goddess Lieu Hanh (Mother Goddess Festival). The structural elements of ritual performance include music (melody, lyrics, musical structure, and vocal); dance; costumes, props, musical instruments; and offerings.

The ritual performance, a typical ritual of the worship of Mother Goddesses of Three/ Four Realms, has its own characteristics compared to other localities because there exists parallel and blended two types of mediums, i.e., the one in the worship of Saint Tran and the other in the worship of Mother Goddess Lieu Hanh. Field research shows that these mediums are so popular that it's thought that those wishing for fortunes will come to the Mother Goddess, and those wishing for disease treatment or dismissal of evil spirits should come to Saint Tran.

It is noteworthy that there is no separation between these mediums' activities in large-scale festivals held by the Government. In fact, they have interfered, merged and

absorbed the 'sacred' elements to create a ritual performance that can operate at both Father's and Mother's festivals.

Chapter 2 analyzes *the changes in ritual performance space and practitioners*

Regarding *ritual performance space*, the change of venue and time of ritual performance is part of the proof. In the past, ritual performance mainly took place in temples, palaces and shrines in front of the altar on the main festivals of the year (that is, festivals of Day Palace and Tran Temple in Nam Dinh province). At present, the venue for performing rituals is much more diverse according to the continuous development of this type of rituals which in recent years has been performed vigorously in most of monuments worshipping the Mother Goddess and Saint Tran. On the other hand, spirit serving session is not only held in temples, but also in communal house in a village, pagodas and even in a "temple in private houses".

Regarding *practitioners*, the role of shamans/ exorcists has changed (specialized assigned). At the same time, there is a change and exchange of position and role between the shamans and mediums. Singers who performs invocation song (*Cung vãn*) have traditionally been considered a conductor in charge of singing songs for the spirits during the whole serving session. However, at present, they also tend to change in many different ways, partly to adapt, partly to follow the mechanism, partly to serve the needs and tastes of the followers. Assistants of medium (*Hầu dâng*) in traditional and current ritual performance facilitate the medium's incarnation of different deities

and spirits. In fact, the assistants' role and assignment somehow remains unchanged. Particularly, the composition of disciples or followers has remarkably changed, from mainly women and traders at the beginning to many social components including government officials (even in the education sector) and businessmen.

The key factor that is decisive to the change of other performing elements is the mediums.

Chapter 3 analyzes *the changes of order and structural elements in ritual performance*.

Changes in ritual content, forms and purposes make the ritual performance clearly transform inside, while maintaining only the religious outer.

The order of ritual performance in Nam Dinh as well as other localities is generally similar. Typically, there are two forms of spirit possession ritual practiced in singing songs for the spirits: *hầu xuôi* (forward mediumship) and *hầu ngược* (backward mediumship); only the former is performed in Nam Dinh province. Singers performing invocation songs must be ready to incarnate all different spirits during one session, in which the singers and instrumentalists musicians invoke spirits (those who the mediums incarnate) and work as mandarins also known as *hầu mở khăn* (incarnation with the opened scarf). The mediums who only sit and listen to singing Songs for the Spirits are called *hầu trắng mặt* (incarnation without the opened scarf). The chronological format of a session consists of four steps: Step 1 - Inviting the Spirit for incarnation; Step 2 - Telling the legend and merit; Step 3 - Praying for support from the Spirit; Step 4 - Farewell.

Although the current performance of the rituals has not changed much in terms of sequence, there have been significant changes in performing elements, namely music (melody, structure, vocal), musical instruments, dance and costumes. There are many differences in offerings in traditional and modern ritual performance. At present, the offerings has gone beyond the notion of “preparing the offerings depending on one’s heart or financial situation”.

Chapter 4 *clarifies the causes of change and issues posed for ritual performance in society today.*

The market economy, the policies for religions and beliefs of the Party and the State of Vietnam as well as the international community, etc. have had a strong impact, leading to the changes of the Mother Goddesses worship tradition in general and its ritual performance in particular, including the one in Nam Dinh province. The current situation in Day Palace shows that the ritual performance is performed anytime and anywhere, regardless of national holidays or festivals. Obviously, the accompanying service activities are also more exciting and professional than ever.

With changes that threaten to disrupt the distinctive characteristics of the Mother Goddess religion, the author asserts that the explosion and changes of most ritual performance constituents have partly made the religion and its ritual performance change remarkably. The views that only with ‘big altars and palaces’ can they be luxurious and sacred, have undermined the purity of a primordial worship. Besides, the mediums have mostly changed their

methods of trance-inducing; in other words, they are fully awake meanwhile in theory, they should be in induced trance state.

The change of ritual performance is an indispensable rule of intangible culture. However, it is necessary to change “selective aspects” to perform the ritual performance that is truly a belief of the community.

Currently, the ritual performance has been seen in a more sympathetic and multifaceted way since it was included in the National Intangible Heritage List (2012), especially since UNESCO recognized ‘the worship of Mother Goddesses in Three Palaces of Vietnamese people’ (in which the ritual performance is an crucial highlight in the overall rituals of Mother Goddess worship) as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

In any case, ritual performance is still unique. In addition to the inherent values, it has had the historical, ethical and artistic values so far, and above all, establishing the community’s belief in being safe and sound, healthy and wealthy life that the gods bring to them. With a highly syncretistic feature, there are many layers of culture, arts and beliefs integrated in ritual performance in Vietnam in general and in Nam Dinh in particular (which has existed for a long time and has been preserved and promoted by the community). Therefore, it still has a certain impact on the life of Vietnamese people today.

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*Introduced by
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