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FEMALE SPIRITS OF THE MALE CULT: TUTELARY GODDESSES IN THE SOUTH OF MODERN VIETNAM (BASED ON THE FIELDWORK IN THE CITY OF VŨNG TÀU)

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Abstract. This article discusses the pantheon in the temple of female spirits (Miếu Ngũ Hành) located in the city of Vũng Tàu in southern Vietnam according to my fieldworks during 2018. The spirits are more various than spirits of pantheon in traditional forms of worship in the north of Vietnam. The inhabitants of Vũng Tàu worship some deities borrowed from neighbors: the Cham and Khmer goddesses, and female deities embodying the five elements of the Chinese religious system (*wu xing*). A feature of the temple is the female divine service, although usually women perform an auxiliary role in ceremonies in honor of tutelary spirits, and in traditional Vietnam they were not allowed to the altars at all. According to the community house territory plan (beginning of the 19th century) the participation of women in ceremonies was originally assumed and, what is important, allowed by the authorities.

Keywords: Vietnam, Vung Tau, folk religion, tutelary spirits, women's spirits, female divine service.

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Introduction

Among the deities worshipped by the Vietnamese, an important place is occupied by female spirits. Along with male deities, they perform various sacred functions, including patronizing the area. This article offers an ethnographic description of one of the temples in the south of Vietnam, dedicated to female spirits, according to my fieldworks in 2018, and I also offer an interpretation of the collected material. The temple which I consider is located in the southern lands inhabited by the Vietnamese only in the 17th century (the seaside city of Vung Tau). The spirits are more various than spirits of pantheon in traditional forms of worship in the north of Vietnam: the inhabitants of Vung Tau (and especially women) worship the Cham and Khmer goddesses and the five female deities embodying *wu-xing*, the five elements of the Chinese religious system. In addition, women conduct ceremonies and perform rituals in front of the altars of the spirits. Therefore, besides the description of the female spirits, I will analyze the phenomenon of female divine service to spirits in the framework of the tutelary spirits cult (which is traditionally male cult, since religious rites were performed exclusively by men for many centuries).

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In my study, I rely on published works on the cult of female spirits in Vietnam, which include descriptions of the origin of goddesses, their role in the pantheon and texts related to them. The most important work on the female spirits of Vietnam is the investigation of Ngo Duc Thinh “Worship of mother-goddesses in Vietnam” [Ngô Đức Thịnh 2009]. Russian scholars also studied female spirits [Knorozova 2000; Knorozova 2020; Sharipov 2001]. Their research works are based on the study of Vietnamese mythology and literary heritage. I use their works as a starting point for the interpretation of the field material. I also rely on works on the history of the tutelary spirits cult in Vietnam [Nguyễn Văn Khoan 1930; Nguyễn Vinh Phúc, Nguyễn Duy Hình 2009; Tạ Chí Đại Trường 2014; Antoshchenko 1997; Novakova 2012].

This article is written following up upon the series of my articles devoted to the study of Vietnamese folk religion basing on fieldworks and on translation of sacred texts about spirits [Gordienko 2018; Gordienko 2021].

Temple of the goddesses of the five elements and its altars

The temple we are studying (Fig. 1) is located in the city of Vung Tau, on the territory of the communal house of the Thang Tam quarter (*Đình thần Thảng Tam*) in the central part of the city (address: 77 Hoàng Hoa Thám). It is named after the goddesses of the five elements (Miếu Bà Ngũ Hành 廟婆五行, or Miếu Ngũ Hành 廟五行).



Fig. 1. Temple of the goddesses of the five elements on the territory Thang Tam communal house, city of Vung Tau. *Photo by the author, March 2018*

The Thang Tam communal house is a temple complex located in a living quarter. All the temples on the territory of this complex are one-story buildings constructed in the 1820–1830's. The main pavilion is the communal house itself built in 1820. It has an altar dedicated to the main tutelary spirit of the quarter². The main pavilion has an attached ceremonial hall on its back with additional altars dedicated to mythical characters patronizing the area as well. Later, two more temples were built in the depths of the courtyard: to the right of the main pavilion is the temple of the whale with a crypt for storing the giant bones of these sacred animals (in 1824); to the left of the main pavilion is the temple of the goddesses of the five elements (in 1832) which I am concerning.

As for the temple main altars of the goddesses of the five elements, several female spirits are venerated (Fig. 2). These spirits are borrowed from neighboring peoples – the Chinese, who influenced the Vietnamese for centuries, as well as from the Chams and Khmers pushed to the southern lands by the Vietnamese³. The main reason for the inclusion of the Chams and Khmers deities in the Vietnamese pantheon was apparently the belief that “foreign” spirits can also harm or patronize and therefore require sacrifices to establish a good relationship.



Fig. 2. The main altars of the temple of the goddesses of the five elements. Thang Tam communal house, city of Vung Tau. *Photo by the author, March 2018*

² The figure of the main tutelary spirit is a historical character – commander Ngo Van Huyen, the founder of Thang Tam settlement in the beginning of the 19th century [Gordienko 2021].

³ Until the 17th century the lands from Vung Tau to the extreme south of modern Vietnam were inhabited only by the Khmers. A Khmer settlement Okap (អុកាប) was located on the territory of modern city of Vung Tau at the mouth of the Sai Gon River. At the beginning of the 17th century, the Vietnamese peasants gradually began to populate the lands along the Sai Gon River and the Mekong Delta. By the end of the 17th century, there was a significant Vietnamese population, as well as numerous Chinese immigrants there. By the end of the 17th century, the Vietnamese had conquered the Cham lands to the north of Vung Tau and the Khmer lands along the left bank of the Mekong Delta, including the territories of the modern cities of Vung Tau and Hồ Chí Minh City [History of Kampuchea... 1981: 89–93, Deopik 1994: 262–263].

As it appears from the name of the temple, the central altar honors **the five goddesses embodying the elements** (*năm bà Ngũ Hành*) scilicet iron, wood, water, fire, and earth. Although the five elements cult refers to Chinese philosophy, these goddesses have no direct analogues in Chinese folk religion. It can be regarded as a comprehension of Vietnamese material in the categories of Chinese culture. The main Vietnamese researcher of female spirits Ngo Duc Thinh believes that the influence of Chinese culture was “patriarchal” (*phụ quyền*), while the Vietnamese since ancient times have identified the forces of nature with the feminine, so the elements were “identified” (*đồng nhất*) with female spirits [Ngô Đức Thịnh 2009: 257]. According to Ngo Duc Thinh, the veneration of the five goddesses is widespread on the seacoast, as the five elements are associated with a variety of crafts (not only agriculture, handicrafts and trade, but also fishing and salt mining) [Ngô Đức Thịnh 2009: 259].

The right altar (Fig. 2, photo on the right) is dedicated to the **goddess *Thiên Y A Na*** depicted accompanied by her sons. *Thiên Y A Na* traces her origin to the Cham goddess Po Nagar, which is the most influential goddess of the Chams patronizing agriculture. In Vietnamese pantheon she acts as the goddess of storms and floods as well as rain-giver [Knorozova 2020: 371-375]. Vietnamese tradition tells the story of a teenage girl adopted by elderly parents. When she grew up, she disappeared into the storming sea and escaped “to the north” where she married a prince and had two sons. Suddenly she left her husband, returned with her children to her native place, put up the temple to her already deceased parents and ascended as a fairy to heaven [Knorozova 2000: 72–73, 173]. Veneration of *Thiên Y A Na* is extremely widespread in central and southern Vietnam. In Thang Tam communal house, there is an addition altar dedicated to *Thiên Y A Na* in an attached ceremonial hall on the back of the communal house main pavilion (aside from the altar in the temple of female spirits).

The left altar (Fig. 2, photo on the left) is dedicated to the local **goddess *Thủy Long***. She is believed to be a patroness of rivers, canals, islands, and she is largely worshipped by fishermen in the area of monsoon winds and typhoons [Dương Hoàng Lộc 2010]. Goddess *Thủy Long* is often perceived as a local deity “embodying” (*hóa thân*) the goddess *Thiên Y A Na* [Ngô Đức Thịnh 2009: 259]. Goddess *Thủy Long* is also associated with a Khmer princess in story from a temple dedicated to her on the island of Phu Quoc. The plot tells about the flight to Phu Quoc of representatives of the deposed Khmer dynasty including a princess who arranged fields and pastures on the new lands [Phương Trần 2021]. Since *Thủy Long* is venerated beyond the lands mastered by the princess, we can consider her cult on Phu Quoc as a worship of a more ancient goddess of water, which was locally personified in a (pseudo)historical character who has great merits and evident connection with the island. We cannot constate which exactly Khmer goddess influenced the Vietnamese pantheon. Perhaps it is referred to tutelary spirits of *neak-ta* (នេកតា), worshipped by the Khmers in this seaside area, or to a deity of a higher order, for example, to the progenitor of the Khmers – the Naga princess (នាគនារី, i. e. snake girl)⁴.

The goddesses of the five elements, *Thiên Y A Na* and *Thủy Long* worshipped in the considered temple in Vung Tau are interrelated, mutually influenced and can act as an embodiment of each other. According to Ngo Duc Thinh, this is due to the fact that the traditional beliefs of the Vietnamese, Chams and Khmers have similarities, and therefore their cultures, “meeting” each other (*gặp gỡ nhau*) in the same territory, inevitably “mix” (*pha trộn*) [Ngô Đức Thịnh 2009: 286]. And yet, in my opinion,

⁴ See the myth about the founding of an ancient Khmer state dynasty as a result of the marriage union of an Indian prince with a Khmer Naga princess (ព្រះបាទសាមនាគ). I enclose gratitude to Irina N. Shmeleva for the suggestion of this idea.

there is no confusion: the creators of the temple and altars in Vung Tau diversify the female deity and depict it as characters that have origins in the traditions of different peoples and thus have different functions. In this case, we are talking about the integration of borrowed deities into the Vietnamese pantheon. According to Phạm Chí Thân, a Vietnamese researcher from Vung Tau, “the people of Ba Rịa – Vung Tau province are unwilling to reject the culture of neighboring peoples, in particular Chinese culture. On the contrary, they always openly choose the most valuable features in order to enrich the treasury of ancient cultural values of the Vietnamese people” [Phạm Chí Thân 2008: 936].

Female deities as tutelary spirits

The cult of the tutelary spirits (*thành hoàng* 城隍) was formed as part of the state religion in Vietnam in the 15th century during the formation of the Neo-Confucian state ideology. Hundreds of local spirits worshipped since ancient times in the framework of vernacular religion, were put at the service of the state: their altars were installed in the communal house (*đình*) which was the place of meetings and taking the most important decisions of the village commune. In addition, the Court chancellery established the pantheon several times during the 15th–18th centuries. Normative biographies of spirits (*thần tích* 神蹟) were compiled and edited in classical Chinese language [Nguyễn Vinh Phúc, Nguyễn Duy Hình 2009: 74-97]. Tutelary spirits were approved by special royal decrees (*sắc phong* 敕封, or *sắc phong thần* 敕封神, *thần sắc* 神敕) which were issued until 1924 [Đặng Chí Huyền 1987: 34-63, Novakova 2012: 84-85].

Among the tutelary spirits we can find both mythical and historical (pseudo-historical) characters [Antoshchenko 1997]. The most priority for the authorities were the founders of a locality (or crafts of a locality), as well as spirits who had merits to the country, especially military merits. These spirits often received the status of the main guardian spirit, and the rest of the spirits were worshipped on secondary altars or even forced out of the communal house [Nguyễn Minh Tường 2013: 99]. Female deities can be found among the state guardian spirits as well because of their traditional veneration in the framework of vernacular religion.

Thang Tam communal house in Vung Tau was built in the early 19th century when the Court no longer compiled stories about spirits but still continued to approve the pantheon by issuing royal decrees. The founder of Thang Tam settlement was proclaimed the main tutelary spirit, and auxiliary spirits were worshipped on the altars of the attached ceremonial hall (including the goddess *Thiên Y A Na*). Later, additional temples appeared on the territory of the communal house. That can be regarded as a step made by the authorities towards vernacular cults of female spirits and the whale spirit which existed in this area for a long time already. These spirits venerated on the territory of the community house were recognized by the Court and indicated in the royal decrees as tutelary spirits [Phạm Chí Thân 2008]. I had an opportunity to see some of these decrees during the festival in honor of the main tutelary spirit in April 2018 (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Demonstration of the royal decree dedicated to a female spirit (mid-19th century) after the ceremony at Thang Tam communal house in Vung Tau. *Photo by the author, April 2018.*

The main feature of the female spirits cult as tutelary spirits in Thang Tam communal house is women divine service. Women conduct rituals, although in traditional Vietnam communication with the other world at the community level was carried out only by men who had the authority to manage this community⁵. The festival in the temple of the goddesses of the five elements takes place once a year for three days from the 16th to the 18th days of the tenth lunar month (in November according to the Gregorian calendar) (Fig. 4). Worship consists of offering ritual food and flowers, lighting and installing incense on altars, prayerful appeals to spirits with bows. Ceremonies are accompanied by drums and gong beats as well as traditional music (performed by men).

According to my observations, the activity of women in the religious sphere and in particular in male religious practices of the tutelary spirits cult has now become ubiquitous in Vietnam. As Hanoi cultural scholar Phạm Lan Oanh argues, “the most remarkable thing today is the participation of women in rituals. In many villages, symbolic sacrifices with the participation of women appeared in festivals. Such a phenomenon did not exist at village festivals in the North before 1945” [Phạm Lan Oanh 2020: 111]⁶.

⁵ Women's religious practices spread largely as a part of vernacular religion during the French colonial period (1862-1954) which was filled with the influence of Western culture, with the loss of the actual power of the Court and state support of Buddhism [Tạ Chí Đại Trường 2014: 307]. At the same time ceremonies in the communal houses remained the prerogative of men even in the context of the crisis of traditional culture.

⁶ The activity of women in religious practices has its own history in Vietnam. American anthropologist S.C. Malarney writes that back in the 1990s, after the abolition of anti-religious policies, when the gradual revival of religious life began, in the case he studied, it was women who had the initiative to restore religious ceremonies in communal homes (men did not dare to resume the veneration of spirits in front of altars, destroyed by them several decades ago). [Malarney 2002: 189-207].



Fig. 4. Festive ceremony in front of the altars in the temple of the goddesses of the five elements on the territory of Thang Tam communal house in Vung Tau. *Photo by the author, November 2018*

Spatial characteristics of the cult

In order to clarify the aspects of women divine service in the temple of the goddesses of the five elements, we need to turn to the spatial characteristics of the temple. This method of anthropologists is effective especially in cases where certain religious practices are not articulated (or not recognized as significant) by the members of culture [Gordienko 2020]. The plans of two communal houses can be compared: 1) the plan of Thang Tam communal house (fig. 5b) and 2) plan of a common communal house of French colonial period [Nguyễn Văn Khoan 1930:114] (fig. 5a).

The classic plan of a common communal house (fig. 5a) provides moving through the territory from a profane space to the sacred one: at the entrance we can see auxiliary rooms, and there is the main pavilion of the communal house with altars in the depth of the courtyard. This principle is disordered in Thang Tam communal house (fig. 5b): entering the territory we can immediately see the main pavilion of the communal house with the altar of the main spirit, and there are outbuildings and additional temples behind it in the backyard. The temple of the whale on the right is a place of worship for fishermen, and the temple of the goddesses on the left can be described as a place of worship for the wives of fishermen. As we can see, the additional temples are gender-specific. At the same time, from the entrance to the territory there is a view of the main pavilion and the temple of the whale, while the women's temple is “hidden” behind pavilions. Apparently, the participation of women in ceremonies in a community home (generally unacceptable) in this temple was originally intended, but not demonstrated to a wide audience.



Fig. 5a. Buildings of a common communal house in the north of modern Vietnam.
 Source: [Nguyễn Văn Khoan 1930:114].



Fig. 5b. Buildings of Thang Tam communal house in the city of Vung Tau.
 Plan drawn by author

Why did the local authorities at the beginning of the 19th century go to break the taboo and allow the participation of women in ceremonies on the territory of the communal house, albeit in a small temple hidden from view? First, the seaside village community was located far from the Court, in new lands, where the central authority in everyday life was less tangible than in northern areas inhabited by Vietnamese for centuries. Secondly, the reason for the loyalty of the authorities lies in the special status of women in the coastal area, since marine fishing is an extremely risky type of economic activity, and the mortality of fishermen at sea due to frequent storms has remained high till nowadays. As a result, the role of fishermen's wives in local religious practices is traditionally important.

Conclusion

The considered case demonstrates several phenomena of Vietnamese folk religion. First of all, it has ability to borrow and integrate foreign elements “Vietnamizing” them, turning them into an organic part of its own belief system and cults through rethinking the borrowed material and saturating it with characteristics of Vietnamese culture. Due to the deep influence of the Cham and Khmer traditions, female deities retained their sacred status in the Vietnamese pantheon and their importance in the religious practices of the Vietnamese settled in new territories (in the 17th-18th centuries).

However, the most significant phenomenon is the loyalty of the authorities and the flexibility of their policy towards the local pantheon and women's religious practices (even though they rigidly controlled the cult of the tutelary spirits as a part of state religion). Thang Tam communal house was built after the state pantheon forming had been completed, and its spirits were not affected by periodical Court unifying and approval. Moreover, the location of Vung Tau in the new lands, away from the Court gave the cult of female deities in the south its special flexibility and, according to the plan of the communal house and its temples, the female divine service was allowed in the male

territory - in the communal house. Consequently, the Court chancellery not only recognized female spirits here as guardians of the area (issuing special royal decrees), but also allowed women service in the temple of female deities. Thus, at the beginning of the 19th century the worship of the goddesses of the five elements was transformed from vernacular practice that had long existed in this area into a part of the state cult of spirits, which for centuries performed by the male representatives of the local clans (as a pillar of state power).

In 1945, with the fall of the Court, the state cult of spirits ceased to exist, and communal houses lost their importance⁷. Since 1986 ceremonies in communal house was gradually resumed. Nowadays the cults of local spirits are supported by the Vietnamese state as a significant part of national identity and culture. At the same time, we can see an increasing role of women in rituals in communal houses, which can be considered as a manifestation of a larger phenomenon - a general trend to expansion of the role of women in various religious traditions of the world. Currently, women's ceremonies are held everywhere in Vietnam, so the female worship of goddesses in Vung Tau fits more and more organically into the modern system of ritual practices and cults of Vietnamese folk religion.

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⁷ Oblivion and destruction of communal houses also affected the southern provinces of modern Vietnam [Tạ Chí Đại Trường 2014: 373-374], although the anti-religious policy of the Communist Party was maintained here only since 1976.

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