

WORSHIPING THE MOTHER GODDESS IN VIET NAM - A MAIN AXIS OF TRADITIONAL-CULTURAL IDENTITY A CELEBRATION FORM OF WOMANHOOD IN VIETNAMESE CULTURE

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Stimulated by the melodious drumbeats and gongs, the spring ceases raindrops and calls for opening the Gate to Heaven connecting Three Worldsⁱ. This is also the moment when people's consciousness falls into spiritual world intended to gain help, good fortune throughout the year from the Mother Goddess (also called Mother of Universe). People do believe that:

*“Mother's heart is passionate like the overflowing Ocean,
Her love is sweet and gentle like kite's flute.”*

Through the practices and beliefs of Maus, Viet Nam can be seen as a country which promotes the democracy at the commune level, and the equity among community always has a reflection in gender equality.

Scientists, through literature studies and practical research showed their characteristic findings of the formation of Vietnamese nationality. They fold that the Vietnamese traditional society is different from China, India, and other neighbor countries in the Southeast Asian region. To describe the Vietnamese society, researchers have jokingly put it as a common truth that *there is none man in Vietnam who did not excessively respect his wife*". The Vietnamese expression which goes that *an order from the Man is not of equal value like a gong from the Woman*ⁱⁱ showed that although the power of the Woman is not

ⁱ Three worlds: The three levels of the state of existence in Samsara: (1) the world of desire, which comprises hell, the realms of hungry spirits, animals, humans and some of the heavens; (2) the world of form, which comprises some higher heavens; and (3) the world of non-form, which consists of supernal heavens.

ⁱⁱ in Vietnamese "*lệnh ông không bằng công bà*"

great, it anyway could be amplified via the decision of the Man relating to societal matters. History also offers us many examples from national heroines like the Two Sisters Trung, like Madam Trieu, and later during modern times like Bui Thi Xuan and others during the two liberation wars where women never have been underestimated.

In the field of religion (or belief), the Goddess usually was a *Sacred Mother* with unlimited power, a *Creative Mother*, the Creator of all species and all things, a *Measureless Super Mother* leading all other deities.

But just here, there is an interesting difference between Deities from China, India and Vietnam. The Ones from China relied mainly on *The Reason*ⁱⁱⁱ and on *The Quintessence*^{iv}; the Ones from India relied mainly on philosophical *Transcendancy*, while our Vietnamese *Mothers* relied mainly on *common sense feelings* thus feeding the thinking system of Vietnam with lyrical, flexible and harmonious elements. One can see that unlike Chinese's or Indian's, the Vietnamese wisdom focuses on *the compassion* ... "Give to others the same pity you want to give to yourselves"^v, such feeling embraces generosity and tolerance that later were realised in everyone's behaviour.

In reality this is the soul and the feeling of the *Mother* and its incarnation into one *Woman*. In the past, Vietnamese people once had access to many ideologies worldwide, such as Brahmanism, Buddhism, then Christianity. But the Mother element was the one that attracted people the most. People used to follow any religion where the major element is the Goddess. And people also invented their own Goddess they need in exchange for the original One. For example, when Buddhism was widespread into Vietnam, people did not mind about the philosophical theory of this religion, their main concern was the sacred *Mother Buddha*^{vi}. In fact, the Indian Buddha was a male character, but it has changed into the *Mother Quan Am* while entering Vietnam to become a kind of powerful and generous (Buddhist) Goddess. The same Goddess had also the

ⁱⁱⁱ in Chinese "Lý"

^{iv} in Chinese "Khí"

^v in Vietnamese, *thương người như thể thương thân*

^{vi} named in Vietnamese *Quan Thế Âm Bồ Tát* or *Quan Âm*

power to self-transform into different personalities bearing different names as *Phật Bà, Phật Mẫu, Quan Âm*. We now can see in the Tien Son pagoda, Bac Ninh province, the transversal wooden plate with transcriptions in Chinese characters *Quan Âm Thánh Mẫu* i.e. the fusion of Buddha with the Mother Buddha. One can also see in the Hương Tích pagoda, Ha Tay province the fusion of the Water Goddess (*Mẫu Thoải*) into Quan Âm (the female Buddha) greening the land during spring time festivities.

The same thing happened to Christianity in Vietnam. In the Bui Chu region (Ninh Binh province), a great character *Mẫu* (Mother Goddess) has been carved in the main window of the cathedral. Later, the “appearance” of Maria in the famous cathedral of La Vang (Quang Tri province) entirely bore the profile of the *Mother Forest* in the Mother Goddess worshipping.

When we enter in depth into other ideological systems like Confucianism and Taoism, we’ll see that, when these systems were lacked of any Mother as representative character, they would have less and less followers. The systems of Confucianism and Taoism had a great impact on the elite of the society, mainly consisting of men, but they meet great obstacles to reach the mass. It is easy to explain this by condemning its *male gender centered* confucianist position. One can also explain the event by the lack of attractiveness of these male systems due to the absence of any Confucianist or Taoist “Mother”. The results are shown in daily exercises of the woman during the festivities far going beyond Confucianist and Taoist worshipping rites ...

Via the role of the woman in Mother Goddess, researchers also saw the close link between different steps of development of Mother Goddess Worshipping in Vietnam with the development of this nation (at least in the Cultural History).

Going through the chaotic prehistoric period, the animistic belief and worshipping of plants and trees, stones and rivers, animals (with totemic element)... , to reach the period of anthropomorphic deities, the role of Mother Goddess have got their most important place. One can see the long period of

time when Vietnamese people were living in the forest and subsisting with natural food, the distribution of task to women was the collecting of plants and fruits. Certainly this source of food was more stable than the hunting. This reality has led to the exclusive respect of the mother of the forest thus making *Her* the first anthropomorphic deity, later called as *Great Mother Forest*^{vii}, then focused into Madam Dong Cuong (in Van Chan district between the two provinces Yen Bai and Lao Cai), Her temple was close to the embankment of the Red River – where the late professor Tran Quoc Vuong has found many *Son Vi Mid-Stone Age* tools^{viii}.

The development tendency following the Red River down stream was a Vietnamese historic necessity so that this nation could become later a wet rice culture nation. The starting place was in Hien Luong (now in Phu Tho province). In this area many thousands years ago beside the picking and hunting economy Vietnamese people already grew plants and trees and knew how to defend their domesticated land. A mother of the nation would then appear as a national necessity, it was Madam Au Co. Naturally, this was a cultural heroin born in the prehistoric time bearing the same character common to all humane beings, i.e. the “flirting and copulating” with outsiders. This event clearly demonstrated the combination of forestry, agriculture and fishing (later integrated into the historic king named Lac Long Quan. From the legend of Madam Au Co giving birth to one hundred eggs one can see the union of different systems as Mon Khmer, Burmo-Tibetan, Tay Thai, Polynesian and others to create the Viet-Muong system. The land for this union was Phu Tho closed to the Viet Tri confluence of three rivers (the Red River, the Da River and the Lo River). Since then and from there, Vietnamese people re-affirmed their wet rice economy and gradually left the hills and mountains to reach the delta, and to give birth to *new cultural heroes and heroines* like Tan Vien, Phu Dong Thien Vuong ...

^{vii} In Vietnamese *Thánh Mẫu Thượng Ngàn*

^{viii} although not yet the conclusion of *my own*.

Also from this area happened the period of splitting up after the period of union: one branch would go down the River to become the Kinh ethnic group; the other branch would cross the Da River then crossed the Son Tay, Hoa Binh, to get the Center Vietnam to become the Muong ethnic group. The historic immigration of the Kinh ethnic group seemed to stop at the borderline between the High level Delta and the Low level Delta, namely the Phuc Yen-Bac Ninh region. From there, the Viet folk would meet up with foreign cultures like Brahmanism, Buddhism, and also from there begun their new life with northern Han invading elements. These historic realities were closely linked to the path of the religion and affected the change of the worshipping of Mother Goddess, resulting in the birth of the Four Mother Elements. These are the Goddess linked to the nature like the Mother Cloud, the Mother Rain, the Mother Thunderstorm, the Mother Lightning^{ix}.

One dare to say that on the migrating way to the sea the pioneer was Mother Au Co then appeared another cultural peak to give birth to a new Mother Nation, namely Mother Man Nuong. Her “affairs” with Khau Da La was nothing else than a common profile of the humanity, i.e. the “l... making” with outsiders. More than that, this state of things reflected the fusion between Buddhism and the local belief, in which there were not only the Brahmanist elements, but also the Chinese thinking in the development from One Mother to Four Mothers. The development of belief inside an agricultural economy in the Low level Delta led to the *Four System* worshipping four powers linking to four worlds: the *Sky*, the *Water*, the *Earth* and the *Forest*. Researchers have divided them up according to their functions as:

- The first system with the creation function including these *Mothers*: *Sky*, *Forest*, *Water* and *Earth*^x.
- The second system with the realisation function as given by the Mothers including *Five Man Deities*^{xi}.

^{ix} Later, under the Chinese influence, changed their names as *Vân – Vũ – Lôì – Phong*

^x In Vietnamese: Thượng Thiên, Thượng Ngàn, Nước, Đất

^{xi} In Vietnamese: Ngũ vị tôn ông

- The third system with the function as defenders of the creation achievements including heroic people in the domain of *building and preserving the nation*.
- The fourth system as an awarding one including people with good deeds when they were alive and they would be reborn in the *Universe of the Mothers* and become *Young Men and Young Women*^{xii}.

Seen generally, the first three systems were linked to deities in the world of agriculture and in the domain of building and preserving the nation. The fourth system can be seen as universal to the human kind now “appropriated” into the *Mother Goddess belief and religion*.

The agricultural economy of Vietnam people once developed has pushed up the development of the manufacture and the trading especially since the XVIth century with the exploitation of the Red River by trading boats. The new development has made room for a new *Mother* in the legend of Chu Dong Tu. He has transformed himself from a Fish deity to a Trader deity to combine with the *Mother Agriculture Tien Dung* and the *Mother Forest Tay Sa* to form a new *Mother Nation* made by the Agriculture, the Trading and the Forestry as seen in the prosperous Pho Hien in Hung Yen.

Then increasing role of the Trading and the trading spirit have strongly influenced the worshipping of the Mother Goddess. We then witnessed the appearance of the *South Sea Mother Buddha*^{xiii} closely linked to trading boats and occupying an important place in the Vietnamese Buddhist shrines – the favourable conditions as for the birth of the *Mother Lieu Hanh* as well as for the union of *Lieu Hanh* and *Mother Buddha*.

All things well considered and after leaving away all elements of superstition (necessarily taking shape in the process of development of the folkloric belief) we can see in the Vietnamese tradition of the Mother Goddess worshipping almost all steps of development of our nation and its decisive

^{xii} In Vietnamese: Cô and Cậu

^{xiii} In Vietnamese: Bà quan Âm Nam Hải

relation to the making of different Mother Deities. Speaking differently, we can say that the development of deities inside the worshipping of Mother Goddess has relatively demonstrated different steps in the Vietnamese long history. Generally speaking, all modern religions in Vietnam were imported from outside, we dare to say that only the folkloric belief in the worshipping of the Mother Goddess can reflect the Vietnamese soul seen as the Vietnamese identity and the protection of this state of mind so that Vietnamese people could never become a copy or a version of another nation – could it be either a good copy or a very good version.

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