

DIALOGUE PERFORMANCE AND RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF “TRADITION” IN THE TÂM VU VEGETARIAN FESTIVAL IN LONG AN, VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

After decades of market-based economic reforms, communal festivals in rural Vietnam have undergone profound changes, reflecting the vitality of the local community. The communal festival held in Tâm Vu (Long An, Vietnam) is such a case. This festival is celebrated to commemorate the local heroes and educate youth about the local traditions; to be able to represent a local region, this festival has gradually added more values through the organisation of ceremonies to pray for the wandering deceased without relatives, purification ceremonies or exorcism. After it was “transformed”, the festival, called “the Vegetarian Festival”, incorporated elements of Confucianism, Buddhism, Caodaiism, hero worship and folk beliefs, and indeed became a significant event. In addition, under the thoughtful organisation of the temple executive board, the local people have been participating in an important “dialogue forum” in which individuals, religious groups, the entire community and local authorities are designated as dialogue partners. The local people, through the Vegetarian Festival, strive to re-establish and develop a local cultural identity,

which directly contributes to strengthening their common voice in the dialogic forum. By inheriting the theoretical and practical results of past research, this study further investigates case studies and confirms that, once the common voice of the community is respected, the local people become proactive and responsible for maintaining and modifying the “tradition”.

Keywords: Tâm Vu, Vegetarian Festival, dialogue, re-establishing tradition, Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

It is rare to see Buddhist ceremonial masters, Caodai¹ masters, local authorities and masses come together for orderly rituals in honour of heroes. It has only been witnessed heretofore by the researchers at the Tâm Vu Vegetarian Festival in Long An Province, which was the result of multilateral “dialogues” during the establishment, re-establishment and development of the festival.

“Dialogue” is a term that we have been working on for this research which represents the symbolic “communication” process of the realisation of concepts and values among subject groups. Especially in this research, the subject groups constitute basic dual dialogue partners, including today’s local communities and their past traditions, between people and local authorities and between people inside and outside the community.

Vietnam’s recent studies on rural festivals and temple festivals have more or less shown an interesting ideological and cultural dialogue model. Endres (2002) studied the changes in Vietnam’s political and academic background from the 1960s to the end of the twentieth century, highlighting that many profound changes have occurred in understanding in the last few decades of that period. In this regard, in the 1960s and 1970s, enterprising scholars introduced new academic discourses on rural festivals, which, in essence, led to the state and people’s “re-understanding” of the concept and the adjustment of national policies on traditional cultural heritage. In a case study in Đại Bái (northern Vietnam), Endres wrote: “The transformative dialogue between party-state ideology and traditional conceptions of moral community will be further continued at the grass-roots of society” (2001: 95). Lương emphasised that “the changing notion of culture in the official discourse on the nation in Vietnam over the past half-century is rooted at least as much in the dialogic relation between the Vietnamese socialist state and local populations, as in the stronger integration of Vietnam into the global capitalist system” (2007: 453).

As a matter of fact, this trend has been vividly presented in the last two decades. Lương Văn Hy and Trương Huyền Chi's (2012) research on Hoài Thị Village Festival in Bắc Ninh (northern Vietnam) showed that although many events in the festival still retain traditional nuances, the dialogue partners implicitly participated in seminars and "re-established new tradition". The Hoài Thị villagers take advantage of the rise of the local social and economic development to link this festival with the negotiated relationship between the present and the past, the young and the elderly, women and men and especially conservative Confucian ideologies and a contemporary market-oriented mindset. Ngô Thị Phương Lan (2012) investigated the communal festival of Tân Chánh village (not far from Tầm Vu) and concluded that the dialogic relationship has been diversified as more and more affluent shrimp farmers and barge service providers actively "invested" in the communal temple festival financially, and also in terms of spirit and encouragement, to gain prestige and further expand business network opportunities. The study of Nguyen (2019) in Bửu Long (Đồng Nai) also shows that the local Hakka Chinese community is currently engaged in a dialogue between their tradition of craft master worship² and the "new" demand of ethnic and social integration in a public Taoist vegetarian festival.

This study on Tầm Vu agrees with Lương and Trương (2012) and further discusses these following ideas:

1. Different religious groups and local communities in Tầm Vu (hamlets, village communes) join to maintain and develop auxiliary functions of the communal festival as channels of dialogue between tradition and development, between the community life and state management, and between themselves;
2. The community of Tầm Vu is actively seeking and establishing local cultural identities through cultural dialogue channels;
3. Once the common voice of the community is respected, the community will become more active in these channels for implementing dialogue and creating new "traditions".

Research demonstrates that religious festivals in Vietnam and other places in Southeast Asia can be organised through imagined dialogue and via compromise between various stakeholders and collectively. However, only the Tầm Vu Vegetarian Festival has been established and rebuilt many times throughout history, alternating between ghost or dead spirit worship and hero

worship (back in the early days) and religious community participation in the current times. This multi-level and multi-component integration is what makes the Tâm Vu Vegetarian Festival unique.

THE VEGETARIAN FESTIVAL AT TÂM VU COMMUNAL TEMPLE

Communal Temple and Temple Festival

During the pre-colonial period, the state ordered the construction of a communal temple (also known as a “communal house”) in every village as the “extended hands” of the imperial court. When new villages were formed, communal temples were established to “mark” the legitimacy and sovereignty of the state. Therefore, political administration and territorialisation are the most significant functions of the communal temples. At the village level, the communal temple is a collectivist civil affairs centre. The village chief and the elderly elite (called the village’s Council of Notables) hosted higher officials or organised civic meetings to solve village affairs (Endres 2001: 70; Ngô 2012: 71). Later, ideological training and education were commenced as a second set of functions. Village patron gods were worshipped in the temple and a local Confucian school was established next to the temple (see Thạch and Lê 1995; Hà and Nguyễn 1998; Taylor 2004: 43).

Communal temples were only allowed to worship state-sanctioned gods, called “thần Thành hoàng (Guardian/Patron gods)”. Thần Thành hoàng are diverse in origin and types, including imaginary deities and deified heroes. King Gia Long of the Nguyễn Dynasty (r. 1802–1820) divided “guardian gods” into three ranks in 1804, including the upper (Thác cảnh thần), middle (Quang ý) and lower (Linh phù); thus, establishing a hierarchical network of temples in each region. Buddhas and other deities have also been honoured in the temples.

When Vietnam entered the era of colonialism, the communal temples became unstable in intrinsic structure and activities. Many of them became ruined, or, in other cases, transformed in terms of the respective object of worship. Some anti-French heroes and meritorious personnel were brought into the temple, such as Trương Định, Nguyễn Trung Trực, Hồ Chí Minh, etc.

The Marxist anti-superstition movement from the 1960s to the 1970s was a major blow to the existence of the communal temples. Being patronised by late imperial courts, the communal temple was known as the symbol of class, inequality and backwardness (Nguyễn 1959: 161–162). Its activities

were considered “superstitious” and “depraved” customs, which contained “obsolete, corrupt and feudal characteristics” (see Endres 2002: 303–306). Many village temples were used as administrative quarters, living quarters or village residences, cooperative warehouses, or market places. For a long time, communal temples have become a discourse symbol of class decomposition.

The 1986 reform policies brought a new look to the communal temples. In addition, the 2001 Law on Cultural Legacies was adopted, opening a new pathway for communal temples and their activities (see Endres 2002: 304). Luong stated in research reports that one of the important reasons for the strong rebound of communal temples, especially their annual ritual activities, was “the dialogic relation between the Vietnamese socialist state and local populations, as in the stronger integration of Vietnam into the global capitalist system” (2007: 440). Under the new discourse of cultural legacies, communal temple’s activities are now assessed as “pure and beautiful customs” (*thuần phong mỹ tục*), and are therefore protected and further developed. However, without the ideological and educational mission originally sponsored by the state, the form and content of today’s communal temples have undergone tremendous changes. Endres (2001) found in Đại Bái village (northern Vietnam) that the villagers shifted their sacrifice from the patron god to the craft ancestor, “a process which reflects both the influence of party-state ideology and the villagers’ struggle to preserve their local identity” (Endres 2001: 93–94). Tầm Vu Vegetarian Festival is another case study of such a type.

Tầm Vu Communal Temple

Tầm Vu is the economic, political and cultural centre of Châu Thành District in Long An Province. It was originally named Tầm Vu Village and has a history of nearly 300 years. Tầm Vu is located approximately 15 km south of Tân An City on Provincial Road 827A, and 52 km from Ho Chi Minh City’s 1A Road. Tầm Vu has a natural area of 3.44 km². It borders Phước Tân Hưng Commune to the east, Dương Xuân Hội Commune to the west, An Lục Long Commune to the south and Hiệp Thạnh Commune to the north. Tầm Vu had a population of 8,500 in 2014, with a population density of 2,468 people/km², divided into six wards. The Tầm Vu Vegetarian Festival is celebrated not only in the entire Tầm Vu town but also in some wards of the nearby communes.

There are two communal temples in Tầm Vu, namely Tân Xuân and Gia Thạnh temples. Among them, Tân Xuân Temple was built in 1821 and was restored many times throughout its history (the latest was in 2018) (see Nguyễn 2020). The communal temple in the area was previously

considered the civic centre of the entire village, but since 1954, this role has ceased to exist. At present, the communal temple exists as a traditional landmark and is a place to mark and preserve the cultural heritage of the entire area. Initially, villagers worshipped thần Thành hoàng (the Guardian God) in the temple with a nameplate entitled “God (Thần/神)”. By 1994, Tâm Vu villagers added the worship of the heroic brothers, Đổ Tường Tụ and Đổ Tường Phong. They were two local heroes who participated in the anti-French uprising lead by Nguyễn Hữu Huân (1830–1875) in the early colonial period.

At present, communal temples in southern Vietnam still retain some basic ceremonies during the year, such as Rice Field Ascent Ceremony (lễ thượng điền), Field Descent Ceremony (lễ hạ điền), Ceremony of Peace and Prosperity (lễ kỳ yên), etc.³ In Tâm Vu, the Ceremony of Peace and Prosperity is called the Vegetarian Festival (occurs on the 15th and 16th of the first lunar month), which is the biggest festival of the year.

The Origin of Tâm Vu Vegetarian Festival

As mentioned above, the annual Vegetarian Festival is held in the most typical communal temple of Tâm Vu area, Tân Xuân Communal Temple. People of Tâm Vu have a saying, it goes “Dù ai buôn bán bộn bề. Làm Chay mười sáu nhớ về Tâm Vu” (whoever is busy with work must return to participate in the Vegetarian Festival on 16 January). The Vegetarian Festival was included in Vietnam’s National Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2014.

Thus far, the Vegetarian Festival held in Tâm Vu has always been an attractive topic and has been valued by many authors. Đặng Văn Chính noted: “The ritual organised at the festival is related to those organised at local pagodas, temples, and communal temples. The festival brings together most people of all genders and religions to participate in the festival. The offerings displayed at the festival are local products, most of which are made from rice and are fruits” (1999: 148). Kỳ Đức (2003) investigated the Tâm Vu Vegetarian Festival and compared it to the full moon salvation festival in mid-August. Finally, the author emphasised that this festival is still relatively similar to the annual communal temple festivals held elsewhere in southern Vietnam, and the exorcism ritual of the Vegetarian Festival is fully compatible with, but is larger in scale, than similar rituals in other communal temples. Phan Thị Yên Tuyết (2005) emphatically pointed out that the Tâm Vu festival held in the Tân Xuân community temple is a large-scale vegetarian festival that attracted more than 20,000 participants from within and outside the Tâm Vu area. The author Phương Thảo (2010) stated that this festival effectively

demonstrated the specific cultural harmony of the South in its rituals and other related activities. Nguyễn Xuân Hồng (2014) once said: “Festivals influenced by different beliefs and religions have certain transformations (compared to the standard ones), such as the Tầm Vu Vegetarian Festival (Châu Thành District, Long An Province). In this festival, one can see the fusion of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Caodaism.⁴ Therefore, people provide vegetarian food and meat at the same time during the vegetarian festival. The adding of the worship of two local heroes was mentioned in a monograph by Long An Province Folk Art Association of Vietnam (2014).

The large vegetarian festival held at the Tân Xuân communal temple in Tầm Vu is unique. A similar festival is celebrated in a Tianhou⁵ Goddess Temple (originally Three Craft masters Temple) in Bửu Long (Đồng Nam Province) in each three-year cycle by the local Hakka Chinese community. The Bửu Long Vegetarian Festival consists of two main parts, namely, offering sacrifices to gods/goddesses and feeding “unworshipped” spirits of the dead, or ghosts via an exorcism (see Nguyen 2019). However, this Hakka festival is not concerned with communal temples and the worship of local heroes. Therefore, it should be regarded as different, instead of not entirely on point.

The elderly of Tầm Vu say that the Vegetarian Festival was born more than 100 years ago to commemorate the local heroes, to pray for the dead (under the form of a Buddhist ritual), and to pray for peace in the community. According to the observations made in this study, there are at least two different interpretations of the meaning of festivals. For the local authorities and the elders of Tầm Vu, this festival can be understood as the public “Memorial Day” of the two Đỗ brothers, soldiers and compatriots who were killed in the two resistance wars against France and the U.S. However, for most people attending the festival, the festival is actually an opportunity to pray for peace. Therefore, many festival customs related to prayers, i.e., providing a meal for “lonely” ghosts or spirits of the dead, salvation and exorcism, are displayed in practice more vividly. It can be said that the local people are more interested in the worshiping figures of Ông Tiều, the reincarnation of Guanshiyin Bodhisattva, who is believed to be able to control lonely souls and destroy ghosts. On the whole, the Vegetarian Festival demonstrates the cohesion and integration of various local religious institutions, including the “Confucianised” Tân Xuân communal temple (or Dương Xuân Hội Temple), Linh Phước Temple (Buddhism), Linh Võ Temple, Điền Temple, Âm Nhon Temple (folk religion), and Phương Quế Ngọc Đài Temple (Caodaism). Therefore, this festival is a meeting point and a platform for “communication” between people and local authorities, between many groups in the community and between individuals and the community.

There are many legends about the origin of the Vegetarian Festival, two of the most famous are related to the two aforementioned interpretations of the meaning of the festival. Legend 1 originated in the history of fighting foreign invaders in the Tâm Vu region in the second half of the nineteenth century. After the French colonialists invaded Tâm Vu, many anti-French uprisings and armed movements were continuously launched, especially the Tâm Vu uprisings led by the two Đỗ brothers under the general leadership of Nguyễn Hữu Huân in the Mekong Delta. The French colonialists ordered the destruction of the Tâm Vu market, arresting and killing all those involved in the resistance movements or suspected. Many compatriots who took part in the uprising were shot and killed, and many civilians were also unjustly killed. The two brothers, Đỗ Tường Tụ and Đỗ Tường Phong, were arrested. Đỗ Tường Tụ was slaughtered at Tâm Vu Market on 26 April 1878. Tâm Vu people buried him behind Tân Xuân Communal Temple. His brother, Mr Đỗ Tường Phong, was executed three days later in nearby Tân An city. After the massacre, the Tâm Vu community spread rumours that “the slain souls haunt the market, and therefore, people cannot do business” as an excuse to organise large-scale prayer rituals. However, the rituals were to pray for the two brothers and those who had died during the brutal suppression of the French. Since then, the vegetarian ritual has been organised annually, which later evolved into today’s vegetarian festival. The two Đỗ brothers were secretly worshipped at Tân Xuân Communal Temple under the generic term “God” in the main altar. After the French left Vietnam, people separated the two heroes’ wooden tablet from the Guardian God of the village and built side altars next to the main hall. In addition to the two brothers, the temple also worships Mr Võ Duy Truỵn, Châu Văn Giác, and the soldiers who died during the uprising movements.

Legend 2 is a verbal transmission. In the past, the Tâm Vu market (in front of the Tân Xuân public temple) attracted merchants, locals and especially children after school. At noon one day (unknown year, but about “a hundred years ago”),⁶ the market building suddenly collapsed. Luckily, the market was empty at the time, which was an abnormal situation, and the children had not come to play. Therefore, the collapse did not cause casualties or personal injury. This collapse was slightly “mysterious”, making the villagers believe that a “salvation ritual” must be held to “feed” the spirits and “release” them (fieldwork data, 14 June 2020 in Tâm Vu). According to local citizen, N.V.N. (74 years old, former head of the temple executive board), before the collapse of the market, people had considered buffalo as a sacrifice. However, the buffalo later became expensive and they offered cow (beef) instead. The

collapse of the market structure made some people suspect that the invisible souls are angry at the change in the sacrifice (interview conducted in Tầm Vu, 15 October 2020).

In the words of the elderly of Tầm Vu, the Vegetarian Festival originated from a common salvation ceremony (Legend 2). It was later transformed by adding worship and sacrifice to historical figures, making the festival an “orthodox” collective cultural event. Similarly, according to the recollections of those elders, the change in historical significance stems from the gratitude of the local community to the local heroes and martyrs, which was not something that was imposed by outsiders.

In terms of content, Legend 1 is related to the anti-French movement, indicating that the Vegetarian Festival originated from the worship of the dead and the community’s respect towards heroes and martyrs in the second half of the nineteenth century. Many local elders have confirmed that the festival began with the worship of the lonely souls of the dead; however, it would not be as large as it is today if there were no connections to hero worship.

If Legend 2 is placed in the context of Tầm Vu after the 1878 massacre, people needed an excuse to hold a prayer ceremony for the two brothers and other martyrs; then, an answer to the question “why Legend 2?” can be found. The local people wanted to pray for the heroes and martyrs; they had to use the reason that “wandering souls troubled and destroyed the market; people need to hold the salvation ceremony to avoid possible disasters” to avoid the attention of the French. There is a lack of written documents and other convincing clues to examine the true beginning of the festival. However, the way of thinking of ordinary people today, not the initial cause from the past, determines what they do at the festival now. These two narratives coexist today, creating two very interesting narratives. Legend 1 guarantees the legitimacy and continuity of the festival, while Legend 2 determines the form, scale and nature of the festival.

Main Activities During the Vegetarian Festival

Tầm Vu Vegetarian Festival is held every year from the 15th to the 16th of the first lunar month. Before 1979, the festival was held in small scale. People set up a simple alter with offerings on the ground to pray for the wandering spirits in the old Tầm Vu market. Since 1980, the activities of the Vegetarian Festival have been transferred to Tân Xuân Communal Temple. The Vegetarian Festival includes activities in the order as follows:

Day 1

Rituals to welcome Ong Tiêu: The festival starts at 10 a.m. on the 15th of January (of the lunar calendar) with the rituals of inviting Ong Tiêu from the Linh Phước Pagoda to the Ong Temple (Phước Vo Temple) to be worshipped for one night. On the 16th, Ong Tiêu is invited back to stay in a stately way in Ong Tiêu rig at Tân Xuân communal house. The statue of Ông Tiêu is made of a bamboo frame and thick papers, approximately two meters high, wearing colourful martial mandarin clothes. The statue is made and sponsored by the Linh Phước Buddhist Temple. His face is fierce, with three horns on his head and a flag in his right hand. His left hand is on his hip. The half-meter long tongue is a symbol of power, and it is believed to lick the wandering ghosts and swallow them into the abdomen. As the central figure of the whole festival, the statue of Ông Tiêu is delicately made and the procession of Ông Tiêu is also solemnly held. People move the Ông Tiêu figure from Linh Phước Temple to Linh Võ Temple and set up the sacrifice ritual during the night. Ông Tiêu is further moved to Tân Xuân Communal Temple and placed on top of the bamboo structure in the front yard in a later ceremony. The parade included members of the cult committee, elders, monks, four people carrying a sedan chair and many people in the area joining in. They start from Tân Xuân Temple, and pick up Ông Tiêu at Linh Phước Temple after completing the initial ritual. When Ông Tiêu arrives at Linh Võ Temple, he is placed on the side altar on the right of the main hall. The prayer ceremony is held with three separate clusters of drum beating. After the ritual, local people are free to worship the Buddhas and Ông Tiêu.

Next is the rituals of solemnly inviting the Buddha and the Masters/Monks which took place at 2 p.m. on the same day, being conducted relatively similar to those inviting Ông Tiêu. The procession starts from Tân Xuân Communal Temple and arrives at Linh Phước Temple, inviting Shakyamuni Buddha and two protectors, Ānanda (A-nan-đà) and Mahākāśyapa (Ma-ha-ca-diếp) into the central altar of Tân Xuân Communal Temple. The cult committee also invites three revered senior monks with long-term experience from Linh Phước Temple or other temples.

Then, the rituals of the Opening Ceremony of the Vegetarian Festival takes place at 3:30 p.m., in the ceremony yard of Tân Xuân communal house, right in front of the martyrs' monument. After the opening rituals, local government representatives give speeches and delegates and people come to lay flowers, burn incense and give a minute's silence in memory of the martyrs. Three rounds of gongs and drums summoning the spirits of the martyrs are played at that time. After the opening rituals, delegates and other

people come to offer incense at the tomb of Mr Đỗ Tường TỰ right behind the communal house.

After that is the Opening Rituals of chanting sutras to pray for peace, which takes place at 6 p.m., by a group of Buddhist monks in charge with the rituals of chanting Pho Mon sutras, reading the petition of the eldest monk and receiving the petition from the Management Board of Tân Xuân communal house, Buddhists and other people (kneeling for pray in the back). These rituals, which are common in pagodas, are performed during the Vegetarian Festival for the purpose of praying for the community's well-being.

Following that is the Consecration Ceremony in honor of the martyrs that takes place at 7 p.m. by the Cao Dai group. Before the consecration ceremony, the Celebration Board holds process rituals to take the representatives and followers of Cao Dai religion, a group of female child virgins in Cao Dai costumes from Phương Quế Ngọc Đài Sanctuary to the communal house for worship rituals. At the village communal house, the representatives of Cao Dai first performs a brief ritual in the main hall and then re-enters the front yard and leads the entire Cao Dai followers including virgin children to perform the ceremony offering incense, lanterns, tea, and fruits three times, each three rounds. Then, a virgin of the Cao Dai ensemble chants prayers and recites poems of teachings as in the art of Hat Boi (Vietnamese classic opera), then ends the Ceremony with the rituals of reading a consecration oration for heroes and martyrs in front of the Memorial.

Finally, the De Phan Ceremony or the Ceremony of Solemnly Inviting the Souls of Martyrs is held at 8:30 p.m. by the Buddhist group in charge. The eldest monk presides over the ceremony accompanied by ceremonial music. In addition to the chanting of the monks, hung by the monks are oration papers praising the merit and the spirit of self-sacrifice for the country of the self-denying heroes of the past.

This festival is called the Vegetarian Festival because all the sacrifices offered on the first day are vegetarian. The sacrificial activities on the first day attract the attention and participation of middle-aged and elderly people, while the collective games and exorcism activities on the second day attract the younger generation (interview with local resident Mr N.V.Đ., 58 years old, retired teacher, conducted in Tầm Vu on 10 October 2020).

Day 2

On 16 January, festive activities as well as rituals of purification and requiem are organised. First, the festival features folk games such as blindfolds while smashing clay pots, tug-of-war, sack jumping, and duck catching and also

modern sports games such as cross-country running, slow cycling competition, volleyball and football, which start at 8 p.m. Simultaneously, the ceremony of preparing meals for the wandering lonely souls and spirits of the dead is hosted at the Âm Nhon Temple by the Ceremonial Board of Tân Xuân communal house. The offering includes a cleaned pig (uncooked), porridge, rice, salt, a plate of pig blood, cakes, fruits, and votive papers. After the rituals of making offerings, votive papers are burned; other offerings are brought to the communal house to be cooked to treat the participants.

Second, the Ceremony of settling Ông Tiêu on the bamboo structure is held at 10:30 a.m. Three elderly members of the cult committee are in charge of the ceremony. An altar with flowers, tea, incense and cakes is well prepared. In front of the structure, people set up a tall and long flag written “For lonely souls those who stay under trees or in the bush, this Vegetarian Ceremony is to make a grand salvation”.⁷ The parade starts from Tân Xuân Temple, and hundreds of participants follow the ceremonial team to Phước Võ Temple, where they pick up the statue of Ông Tiêu. Four young men bring the statue of Ông Tiêu back from Phước Võ Temple to the front yard of Tân Xuân Communal Temple, before placing it on a bamboo frame during the drums and ritual music performance. At the same time, another ceremonial team conducts a similar parade to “invite” the lonely ghosts of the Âm Hồn Temple to “enter” the main ritual space. After performing an incense ritual, the wooden tablet of lonely souls is placed at the main altar in front of the bamboo structure.

Third, the Ceremonies calling for the lost souls (*Chiêu u* Ceremonies) is conducted at 12 p.m. at both the river and road ways. Each ceremonial team must include three masters accompanied by the drum and gong ensemble, followed by the local participants. The *Chiêu u* teams may walk to a nearby T-section (both inland and riverway) and important sites such as the District’s main intersection, Ông Khôi Bridge, Cầu Chùa Bridge and Hiệp Thạnh point, where the ceremonial masters offer wine, and incense, and bow to invite wandering souls to join the sacrificial meal at Tân Xuân Communal Temple. Other *Chiêu u* teams must go to nearby communes (An Lục Long, Phú Ngãi Trị and Hiệp Thạnh), the District Martyr Cemetery, and nearby god temples to invite the spirits. Local authorities appoint security groups to accompany the *Chiêu u* teams to ensure order and convenient transportation. The *Chiêu u* ceremonies end when all teams return to the ritual space. This ritual is very popular in folk traditions and is usually performed on the seventh full moon day of the lunar calendar. The Tâm Vu Festival combines the ritual dedicating the village god(s) and exorcism.

Fourth, rites of “awakening” the souls and “inviting” masters, the most interesting ceremonies, are performed at around 6 p.m. The ceremony starts with the grand performance of “Tang Seng Monk (唐僧) and his disciples on the way to the Buddha land (the West, ‘India’)” as written in the Chinese classical romance *The Journey to the West* (西遊記, by Wu Cheng’en, Qing Dynasty). The characters include Tang Seng Monk (唐僧, Tam Tạng, the master), the Monkey King (齊天大聖, Tề Thiên Đại Thánh), monk Zhu Ba Jie (豬八戒, Trư Bát Giới), monk Sha Seng (沙僧, Sa Tăng) and White Horse (白龍馬, Bạch Long Mã), who are all performed by experienced local amateur-artists.⁸ All of them kneel in front of the Ông Tiêu structure, listening to the “Imperial Order”, and then walk to “attack” and “destroy” demons in the “demonic centres” in four places (e.g., the District T-section, Lò Muối, Thầy Sơn Bridge and in front of Linh Phước Temple). It is worth noting that the members of each hamlet in Tầm Vu wear demonic costumes and play the role of the demons in these “centres”, each of which has a different style and colour. Thousands of participants participate in the parade, which is ensembled by drums and gongs. After conquering the demons in the “demonic centres”, the team comes to kowtow Buddha at Linh Phước Temple, acquiring the Buddhist scriptures and inviting monks to the Ông Tiêu ceremonial space in Tân Xuân Communal Temple. This activity is organised in the early evening, and people can join the crowd after work (or school), which makes the festival a large event.

Fifth, at 8:30 in the evening, a candlelight ritual is held at the corner of the Tầm Vu River, followed by a ceremony of releasing animals (birds, fish and turtles). Simultaneously, three members of the cult committee and two monks hold a sacrificial ceremony at Tân Xuân Communal Temple. Then, they transport ten sacrificial rafts to the Tầm Vu River, which are released into the river with the sound of drums and gongs and a unicorn dance performance. On the river, one can see the large lantern boat carefully decorated before the festival. People place tablets, a boiled duck, cakes and incenses on it. The four peoples standing in front of the ship play the role of the celestial official, God of Wealth, Kim Đồng and Ngọc Nữ.⁹ While the celestial official and God of Wealth perform the fire whip dance, Tiên Đồng and Ngọc Nữ shake two cups of red cloth with coins inside to make a yin-yang integration in local people’s mentality. At the same time, the monks perform chanting and animal release rituals by the riverside. After the ceremony, the boat is pushed to the middle of the river, and people burn torches, turning the boat into a flaming object.

Finally, the ceremony of knocking down the bamboo structure and seeing off the participants is organised at midnight. After the last prayer for peace and prosperity, all offerings (rice, fruits, cakes, candies, etc.) are thrown

to the ground for free picking. The religious sect committee burns the statue of Ông Tiêu and paper money, ending the two-day ceremonial activities. Accordingly, all parts of the Ông Tiêu statue must be burned. Otherwise, some people believe that unfortunate events may happen.¹⁰ Participants can earn a lucky souvenir in the temple (prepared in advance by the religious sect committee) and go home after that. By the riverside, the farewell ceremony (to the unseen spirits) is performed. A paper boat made of a wooden structure filled with sacrificial offerings (rice, salt, pig's head, meat, wine and incense) is well prepared. After a row of drum beats to bid farewell, the paper boat is released into the middle of the river. The cult committee members return to Tân Xuân Communal Temple and conduct the ritual of returning the lonely soul wooden tablet to Âm Nhon Temple. This marks the end of the vegetarian festival.

The field surveys from 2014 to the present show that the timing of certain events have changed to proceed either sooner or later; some post-ceremonial activities have been adjusted (modified, added, or cancelled), but the main ceremonial activities remain unchanged. A member of the community festival board emphasised that the adjustment was due to two main reasons, namely, the financial situation and the goal of attracting participants (fieldwork data, 22 May 2019, in Tâm Vu).

THE VEGETARIAN FESTIVAL: AN IMAGINARY DIALOGUE CREATED AND DIRECTED BY THE COMMUNITIES

The Tâm Vu Vegetarian Festival vividly presents four main phases suggested by Theodor Gaster (1953), namely, mortification, purgation, invigoration and jubilation. After a full lunar year circle, the Tâm Vu people feel that wandering souls are really “hungry” and “ready to bring troubles” to people; therefore, the community must “feed” the hungry (lonely souls) and eradicate the troublesome souls (demons). Ông Tiêu, an incarnation of Kuanyin, is thought to deal with both hungry ghosts and demons. Before the exorcism ceremony is held, the *Chiêu u* ceremonies organised widely in important corners/places of Tâm Vu Town have shown the collective motivation to eliminate the possible troubles caused by the wandering spirits (the mortification phase). The main purification (purgation) rite on the second day of the festival is considered to be the liminal [see Arnold van Gennep's (1909) work]. This is different from the researchers' expectations of the annual communal temple ritual, in which the Orthodox Confucian ceremony of praying for peace and prosperity plays

a central role on the first day. The invigoration phase is marked by the event of the lantern boat on the Tầm Vu river where Tiên Đồng and Ngọc Nữ shake the red chalices, symbolising the new life circle (Yin-Yang cycle) and the animal release ceremony by the river. Participants hope to get lucky items from God and Buddha (in temples) after the exorcism ceremony because they wish to bring back home new hope, joy and aspiration (the jubilation phase).

Common Expectations of the Vegetarian Festival

In a functionalist approach, the Vegetarian Festival is celebrated to fulfil several goals, such as preserving and educating local history, preserving and promoting traditional values of the Tầm Vu area, promoting communal cohesion and social integration, expressing and educating humanitarian goals, and so on. It is worth noting that many communal temples in the Mekong Delta worship or co-worship local heroes, that is, Nguyễn Trung Trực is worshiped in many places in Kiên Giang and An Giang province, Phan Thanh Giản in Thoại Sơn District (An Giang province), Trương Định in the Gò Công region (Tiền Giang province), Võ Duy Dương in the Tháp Mười region (Đồng Tháp province), etc. The addition of two heroic brothers and local martyrs to the Tân Xuân community temple (Tầm Vu) is obviously not a new phenomenon. History and local tradition are hidden in the local ritual space, and the ritual itself is a historical “museum”. The Tầm Vu people say “Làm chay tưởng nhớ tiền hiền. Có công khai khẩn, hậu hiền khai cơ” (i.e., “The Vegetarian Festival is dedicated to the predecessors who dedicated their lives to open, cultivate and protect the land”). Local resident Ms N.T.H. (44 years old, resident of Quarter 2, Tầm Vu Town) stated: “The Vegetarian Festival provides an opportunity for locals working away from home to return to Tầm Vu. They offer incense and bow to show respect and commemoration to their predecessors and ancestors, who gave their blood and worked hard to make today’s prosperity. At the same time, the festival also reminds young people to be responsible for building their Tầm Vu homeland” (interview conducted in Tầm Vu on 9 February 2020).

The festival is scheduled from 15–16 January, which is just the first new full moon festival in Vietnamese tradition and only two weeks after the Lunar New Year (Tết holidays). This is when the spirit of the Tết holiday is still lingering. Some people consider the festival as the second Tết holiday (interview with local resident, Mr L.Q.T., member of the religious sect committee, conducted on 9 February 2020). The Tầm Vu people continue to participate in the Vegetarian Festival full of excitement, and then enter the new business and cultivation seasons. When asked why the people do not organise the festival at the end of the

year or other times of the year, one old man in Tâm Vu answered, “Even if we know that demons often disturb people, we must let them enjoy the Tết holidays first!” (statement from Mr L.Q.T., 62 years old, Tâm Vu resident, interview on 21 May 2019). “Let the wandering souls and demons enjoy the Tết holidays” is a very popular concept, which expresses the beautiful humanistic spirit of the Vietnamese people.

The Vegetarian Festival is considered to be the second Tết holiday of the Tâm Vu residents. Mr N.H.T., male, a Tâm Vu resident, said: “Every year after the Lunar New Year, I go to Phước Võ Temple [one of the Vegetarian Festival sites] to participate in the preparation activities such as cleaning, pruning, and decorating lamps and flowers. As this is a festival of the entire community, local people donate money, food or provide labour to participate in the festival organisation” (fieldwork data, 2019, in Tâm Vu).

Related narratives

However, we believe that the Vegetarian Festival is a “stage” where many narratives and dialogues are intertwined, creating the dynamic of the whole festival.

The first narrative to mention is dialogue and compromise between different religious groups in the Tâm Vu community, especially the Confucianised communal temple participants, Buddhists, Caodais, ancestor worshippers and popular spiritual believers. Confucianised rituals and meanings represent masculine power, while Buddhism represents and is more linked to feminine participation. Religious confusion is very common in Vietnamese tradition, but the integration, harmony and unity of existing religions in Tâm Vu are very unique and special. Caodai leaders prioritise Buddhist groups in the entire festival agenda, and the integration of local authorities and Buddhist groups in core rituals strongly reflects an alignment of the state management and local communities. As the festival organisers (temple executive members) have repeatedly stated, the ritual order shows the harmonious compromise and integration of the various religious groups during the festival.

How can different groups of people unite in a well-organised festival agenda? Of course, the agenda includes the commemoration of heroes and exorcism. Huỳnh Quốc Thắng in his analysis on the Tâm Vu Vegetarian Festival, concluded that: “The spirit of ‘when you drink water, think of the source’ (uống nước nhớ nguồn) and ‘ancestor worship’ have united the people, enabling them to transcend religious prejudices or regional boundaries, and move toward the same festival goal in a unified way” (2013: 190).

When the elderly of Tầm Vu were asked about the participation of different religious institutions during the festival, some told the reporters that they did not know how and when the integration happened. Only one old man confessed that, at the beginning, there was no vegetarian festival attached to the communal temple. In the past, the communal temple regularly organised its sanctioned ceremony to pray for peace and prosperity. After the massacre in 1878, the sacrificial ceremony dedicated to the local heroes, the martyrs and the wandering souls was primarily held in a purely folk way in the marketplace (as a subterfuge so as not to attract the attention of the French rulers); however, it did not attract much participation of the local folk. The village's Council of Notables discussed and decided that the ceremony should be held in a shared ritual space of the entire village. Neither the Buddhist temples nor the local Caodai Temple could achieve the goal of holding a complete festival. It was the Tân Xuân communal temple, which was once the centre of the whole village in the late imperial period, which was capable of, and ultimately responsible for unifying people from various financial and human resources to hold ceremonies. The local insurrection against the French occurred in the late nineteenth century; however, the heroic commemoration of the festival was only officially added in 1994.

Historically, the communal temple was sponsored by the monarchical state and managed by a strict Confucianist principle. Communal temples in the past only allowed the placement of Buddhist altars as a form of side worship,¹¹ but the exorcism ceremony was not held at the temple. At that time, exorcism was performed only at ghost temples, or spirit temples elsewhere. The French colonisation weakened the Confucian principle, making the communal temple an open ritual space for other sources of ceremonies. As far as Tầm Vu is concerned, Buddhism, Caodaism, ancestor worship and solitary soul worship make it easy to participate in the Vegetarian Festival of the Tân Xuân Communal Temple. Although non-Confucian participation is welcomed, the orthodox community temple ceremony is held on the first day of the Vegetarian Festival, which vividly shows the completion of the two main tasks of the Tân Xuân Communal Temple: preserving and expanding the public temple tradition of the entire community, and creating and providing common ritual space for other religious sources to participate and share.

The grand salvation ceremony and the ceremonial “feeding” of the lost souls are important sacrifice activities for Buddhism and popular spiritual worship in the rural areas of Vietnam; therefore, the activities on the second day of the Tầm Vu Vegetarian Festival mark the main role of Buddhism as the popular religion. Taoism is found to be limited in these activities, except

for the detail of Tiên Đổng–Ngọc Nữ shaking the red chalices to mark the new circle of Yin-Yang cycle. Caodaism is designated to hold the ceremony dedicated to heroes and martyrs, which strongly demonstrates the spirit of harmony and compromise in a Buddhist-based festival. A Caodai follower stated: “This is a common festival for the entire community regardless of religion. Therefore, the Cao Dai followers are also honoured to be able to contribute to the festival. “No one is left behind” (statement of Mr T.V.B., 37 years old, Tâm Vu resident, interview on 28 February 2020).

One may ask “where is Catholicism?” The number of Catholics living in the Tâm Vu area is limited; however, there is no Catholic organisation in the town. In general, in such a festival, Catholics may not find anything that conforms to their religious principles. Nevertheless, Catholics can freely participate in festival activities like other ordinary people. Local resident N.V.Đ. disclosed: “In the past, we sent them an invitation every year. But they did not come. Later, we stopped inviting them. They may come to join individually” (interviewed in Tâm Vu, 20 October 2020).

Compared with the communal temple festivals in the Mekong Delta, the Tâm Vu Vegetarian Festival is indeed unique. Even though many other temples worship or co-worship heroes and martyrs, only the Tâm Vu communal temple holds a vegetarian festival. The Nguyễn Trung Trực Communal Temple in Rạch Giá city (Kiên Giang province) holds a large annual memorial ceremony that attracts thousands of participants; however, it strongly shows the combination of Confucianism and hero worship. The Phan Thanh Giản Communal Temple in Thoại Sơn (An Giang) and the Trương Định Communal Temple in Gò Công vividly show similar features (fieldwork data, 2015 and 2016). Lương (1994) in his study at the Khánh Hậu Communal Temple (approximately ten km from Tâm Vu) and Ngô Thị Phương Lan (2012) in her study at the Tân Chánh Communal Temple (approximately 20 km from Tâm Vu) show the dynamic but random participation of different religious groups in the community but not religions as collective units. The Vĩnh Bình Communal Temple in Gò Công Tây (Tiền Giang province, approximately thirty km from Tâm Vu) combines the annual communal temple fair with the Tết holiday; however, the festival is held before Tết. Days prior to the Tết holiday, people who work away from home can return to participate, and locals can buy necessary items at the trade fair accompanying the festival. Like *Chiêu u* ceremonies and exorcist rites in Tâm Vu, the trade fair attached to the Vĩnh Bình Communal Temple Festival attracts thousands of participants, but it cannot replace or overwhelm the orthodox Confucian rituals held in the main hall of the temple (see Ngô 2020).

The second narrative comes from the dialogue between the festival organisers and scholars/administrators regarding non-Confucian exorcism activities in the Vegetarian Festival. The fact is that the communal temple usually does not accept non-standard customs or ceremonies to be held there, and the Tầm Vu vegetarian sacrificial ritual was first held in the marketplace and later moved to the current communal temple. During the French rule (1858–1954) and the Saigon government (1954–1975) period, the issue of orthodoxy of the Vegetarian Festival held at Tân Xuân Communal Temple was not raised. Neither was it raised during the two post-war decades of high socialism (1970s and 1980s). However, the 2001 Cultural Heritage Law and the development of recent scholarship have brought forth discussion. Should exorcism activities return to the society, and the communal temple resume its standard Confucian rituals (honouring gods, heroes and martyrs, but not performing exorcism rituals)? Some local administrators are aligned with academic groups having the opinion that festival activities can be more standardised and focused; however, they did not propose the idea of removal of exorcism rituals. As the Vegetarian Festival has become an important landmark in the Tầm Vu area, they worry that any small change may lead to the decline of the festival.

This issue is not explored in the interview questions, and the study has found that the religious sect committee members and the local residents are of the same opinion, while some scholars have a different opinion. Local resident Mr N.V.S. further stated: “The festival is not superstitious and conforms to the government’s resolution No. 05, and therefore, there is no reason to relocate the festival” (interview on 20 October 2020).

A religious sect committee member said: “The communal temple institution is no longer the state-patronised and state-controlled unit. Over the years, the communal temple and its activities have absorbed all the local history, and therefore, it has become the soul of the community rather than a tool of state management” (statement of Mr N.V.B., 67 years old, Tầm Vu resident, interview on 20 October 2020).

An ordinary resident of Tầm Vu emphasised a similar viewpoint. She said: “We do not know the origin and attributes of the communal temples. However, the Vegetarian Festival in Tân Xuân Communal Temple has become a common festival for Tầm Vu people. Almost no one can change it!” (Ms T.T.H, 48 years old, Tầm Vu resident, interview on 20 October 2020).

In our viewpoint, the 2001 Cultural Heritage Law was built on the basis of Marxism, especially the principle of historical materialism. Therefore, culture is the result of social and economic phenomena in each particular era, and modern

communities are actually the creators and owners of their culture. What we can do now is classify the events during the festival and maintain them in the chronological order. The local religious sect committee is actually fully aware of this issue, and therefore, they must have retained the orthodox Confucian and Buddhist rituals on the first day, while all exorcism activities can be performed on the second day at the Tâm Vu Festival. The practical situation in the Mekong Delta shows that pure communal festivals (without post-ceremony events) usually do not attract the public, and therefore, lack sustainability. Regular communal temple festivals have always been composed of two different parts, namely, sacrificial rituals and collective activities. Therefore, the exorcism after the main rituals does not violate the basic principles of the communal temple institution and the 2001 Cultural Heritage Law. Folk games and sports have indeed attracted the public. Local resident Mr N.S.H. (36 years old, Dương Xuân Hội commune resident) said: “Duck catching is the most interesting game, attracting the most number of participants in the folk games at the Vegetarian Festival. I think that being able to catch a duck or not is not important. Everyone is happy, and happiness is very important in a festival” (interview in Tâm Vu, 28 February 2020).

However, this issue introduces conditions that require caution, requiring festival organisers to always pay attention to the compatibility and order between the main sacrificial activities and collective activities. In addition, the Vegetarian Festival was included in the “National Intangible Cultural Heritage List” by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in 2014, which has attracted more investment and attention from national institutions and local authorities. This situation can function as a mechanism to ensure that the core ideas of the festival are retained.

The third narrative comes from the dialogue between the Tâm Vu residents and nearby communities. The Tâm Vu people cooperate and enthusiastically participate in the festival to pursue a common goal, which is to establish a unique reputation and prestige for the area. This goal has been successful over the past years. A member of the local religious sect committee said: “The ancients in the land of Tâm Vu created the Vegetarian Festival with the purpose of praying for peace, commemorating patriotic heroes, and praying for peace and prosperity. Everyone wishes all the best for the entire community. Today, we hope to hold the Vegetarian Festival in a safe, civilised, and disciplined manner and showcase traditional culture to enhance the image of our land and interact with other places. Although we have expanded the purpose and form of the activities, the spirit of the festival is strictly protected” (interview in Tâm Vu, 28 February 2020).

Representing the folk perspective, local resident Mr L.K.S. (a resident of An Lục Long commune) stated: “For one year, I was engaged in the work of making flowery carts, especially responsible for the symbol of dragon fruit, which is the main crop that brings wealth to the people of Tầm Vu (Châu Thành District). I am very happy and proud of this. Therefore, I can help visitors to learn about Tầm Vu land and the entire Châu Thành District in general” (interview in Tầm Vu, 28 February 2020).

Ms H.M.X., born in Tầm Vu but now lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City, further disclosed: “Every year, because of the love of the festival, I come back to join and I like this festival. This festival is really meaningful, well-organised, and interesting. Next, year, I will introduce and invite more friends to participate in the festival in Tầm Vu” (interview in Tầm Vu, 28 February 2020).

The Subterfuge and Dialogue with Local Authorities

The Tầm Vu Vegetarian Festival was primarily a secret ritual, dedicated to those who lost their lives in the 1878 massacre. When we asked “What is a vegetarian festival organised for?”, the common answer is “to pray for peace and prosperity”. When further asked “Why did the old Tầm Vu market building collapse?”, no one has a straightforward answer. Special attention is paid to Mr N.V.Đ.’s disclosure: “In order to avoid French oppression, the Tầm Vu people spread the news about wandering souls destroying the market, disrupting people’s business to make an excuse for holding the sacrificial ceremony. However, this is a disguised ceremony. People organised it to commemorate the meritorious soldiers” (interview in Tầm Vu, 10 October 2020).

This informant did not confirm the main reason of the collapse of the market; however, the researchers suspect that it may have been a man-made incident. As being stressed, people needed an excuse to spread the rumour, and the crowded market collapsed on a quiet day without causing personal injury. It was actually a “long time ago”, “more than a hundred years ago” and “no one mentioned it”, and therefore, people of the current generation do not know. In any case, the collapse of the market was obviously a good excuse to formalise the ceremony. The popularity of using a cow as a sacrifice instead of buffalo is another narrative to promote the formalisation of the sacrificial ritual at that time.

The sacrificial ritual was first established in the marketplace based on these “excuses” (i.e., reasons for organising the ceremony) or “narratives”.

Local resident Mr N.V.D. added: “Offerings were special. The ceremony was well-organised. Moreover, the eulogy read at the ceremony was really to dedicate it to the two Đỗ brothers and other martyrs” (interview in Tâm Vu, 10 October 2020).

The ceremony was then moved to Tân Xuân Communal Temple in 1980 when people acquired the approval from the authorities. In the new ritual space, people felt better for two reasons, namely (1) the communal temple is the centre of all community groups, and (2) its ritual space is standard and orthodox, where the community can “communicate” with local authorities. Mr L.Q.T. (55 years old, local cadre) highlighted: “The people and the local religious sect committee both agreed to not move the festival back to the marketplace because it did not fit the sacred atmosphere of the festival” (interview in Tâm Vu, 10 October 2020).

Frankly speaking, the rituals of purification and exorcism that we know today originated from the ceremony of making offerings to the victims in 1878 and later to the martyrs. Therefore, in terms of attributes, these rituals still show historical and human values, especially those closely associated with the custom of worshiping heroes and martyrs. The people of Tâm Vu want to emphasise these values to ensure the legitimacy and legality of Tâm Vu Festival as a whole on local agendas.

In reality, the Tâm Vu community has deployed a successful strategy to establish and officialise the Vegetarian Festival in many steps. Such a strategy secretly expresses the dialogue relationship between the Tâm Vu people and the authorities in many periods (the French rulers and later the Vietnamese authorities). The entire process of the establishment and formalisation of the Vegetarian Festival can be described as shown in Figure 1.

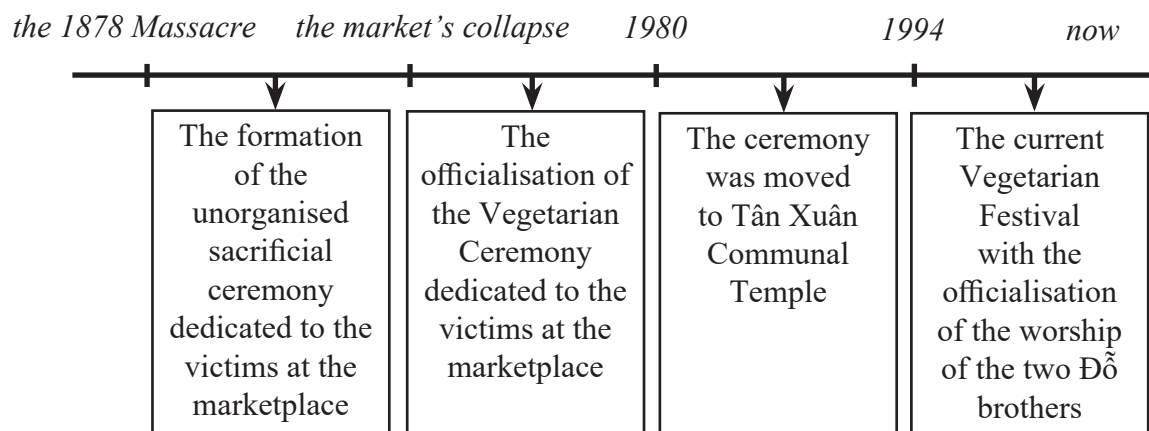


Figure 1: Significant incidents and transformations of the Tâm Vu Vegetarian Festival.

The local community has used festival activities to mobilise and wisely express collective voice and power (towards local authorities). In addition to using the aforementioned reasons for organising the festival, the active participation of the people in the hamlets and quarters of the Tầm Vu area also provides adequate and reasonable evidence to justify the use of collective voice and power. In name, the residents of the hamlets and quarters negotiate and decide to register their own “demonic centre” with their identical costumes, dances and “combat” strategies, expressing the voice of the entire community in the hamlets/quarters. Although their registration is not necessary, they actively participate for the benefit of their communities. The roles of the demon and sub-demon characters in demonic centres are all performed by young men, because women are not strong enough to participate in “battle”, and they may not like an ugly disguise (fieldwork data, 2019). Although the interviewees did not directly mention “collective power” and the need for communication and dialogue between hamlets/neighborhoods and local authorities, through field observations and logical reasoning from the information provided, this inference is well-founded.

Recently, the organisers of the festival have been dealing with another legal issue with local authorities, namely anti-superstition. The spiritual nature of exorcism on the festival’s second day is essentially obscured by the narrative of heroic memorial and adoration of village gods; however, the details of robbing the ghost offerings during the exorcism ceremony are concluded as “superstitious”, “offensive”, “uncivilised” and, thus, “must be deleted”. The event was cancelled or removed a few years ago; in its place, the organisers organised the distribution of lucky items or souvenirs. However, the cancellation of the ritual of robbing the ghost offerings reduces the festive atmosphere as people are not eager to participate in the Festival anymore. According to local resident Mr T.V.T. (55 years old, a local religious sect committee member), the local community has opposed this change. They think what they need is a festive atmosphere, rather than offering gifts or lucky items (interview with local resident Mr N.V.T., 48 years old, conducted on 9 February 2020). Currently, the issue is still under debate, and the organisers are still brainstorming to improve the situation.

However, the organisers also took measures to increase the rational aspects of the festival. Since 1999, healthier sports and games activities have been added to the second day of the festival. The sports activities that do not attract participants have been gradually improved or removed to enhance interpersonal communication and entertainment.

CONCLUSION

The Confucianised communal temple of Tâm Vu and its Vegetarian Festival have continuously transformed during the last two centuries, performing the proactive role of local groups and the entire community in re-establishing and modifying the public festival in rural areas. This festival contains many historical traces of political struggles and religious disguises, as well as dialogues, negotiations and compromises between various religious groups and local authorities in the later periods, vividly demonstrating the wisdom and inner strength of the local communities. One of the key reasons for the festival's successful re-establishment of tradition is the ability to form and empower local communities and various religious groups to actively participate in the organising activities. This type of dialogic performance creates a role for multiple voices in the essence of the festival and simultaneously arouses the attention and participation of the community, which determines the success of a rural festival. Collective dialogue performance is one of the most effective ways to promote social transformation in a constantly changing society such as Vietnam.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

This study was carried out at Tân Xuân communal house, Tâm Vu town, Châu Thành district, Long An province in 2020. The data collection was conducted according to the field study standards in culture studies with the consensus of the Management Board of Tân Xuân Temple. There was no conflict in the data collection process in the community.

NOTES

- * Le Thi Ngoc Diep is an expert in Vietnamese Cultural Studies. Le specialises in Vietnamese spiritual culture, especially the Viet communities in the Mekong Delta, under the cultural relation with Southeast Asia and South Asia. She got her PhD degree in Vietnam National University - Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam). She was a visiting scholar to Chi Nan University (Taiwan) in 2007, Pukyong University (Korea) in 2018 and 2019, and Hong Kong Polytechnic University (virtual) in 2020. Le Thi Ngoc Diep is the author/co-author of three books and twenty articles and book chapters published in local and foreign journals and edition books.
- ** Nguyen Ngoc Thanh is an expert in Cultural Management thanks to his rich experience in working with local communities regarding the preservation and promotion of cultural heritages. He is currently Head of the Office of Cultural Heritage. Thanh has published many articles and books related to the field of culture.
- ¹ Caodaism is a comprehensive religion constituted from elements of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Catholicism and other religions established in southern Vietnam in 1926. According to statistics of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs for 2015, the total number of Cao Dai dignitaries, sub-dignitaries and followers in Vietnam is nearly 2.7 million (see Huynh 2017), most of whom live in southern Vietnam.
- ² “Craft master worship” is the worship of handicraft founding masters.
- ³ “Field Ascent Ceremony (lễ thượng điền)” and “Rice Field Descent Ceremony (lễ hạ điền)” are two rites marking the beginning and the end of a traditional crop and also a year of labour in the wet rice farming culture. Thuong Dien festival takes place at the beginning of the year, so it is often combined with the Ky Yen festival to pray for favourable weather for the upcoming crop. The Ha Dien festival is held at the end of the crop, at the end of the year, when the rice is about to be harvested, praying for a high productivity and not being damaged by birds or animals.
- ⁴ A hybrid religion (ancestor worship, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Catholicism, Islam and popular religions) born in Tây Ninh (southern Vietnam) in the early twentieth century. Currently, it has 2.4 million followers (State Bureau of Statistics, 2010).
- ⁵ “Tianhou” is an important deity in the beliefs of the Chinese and Vietnamese of Chinese descent.
- ⁶ Told by Mr N.K.T., interview conducted on 9 February 2020 in Tầm Vu.
- ⁷ *Hồn lạnh lẽo nương theo cây cỏ. Hội Chay dân giải thoát tâm linh.* Translated by authors.
- ⁸ For example, the role of Tang Seng Monk has been performed by local resident, Mr N.V.T. (born in 1930, Tầm Vu resident), for many years.
- ⁹ In Vietnamese folk tradition, Kim Đồng and Ngọc Nữ are the celestial servants of the Heavenly Empress.
- ¹⁰ This detail is provided by Mr N.M.Đ. (conducted on 10 October 2020).
- ¹¹ According to Ngô Đức Thịnh, the Trần Dynasty (1225–1400) ordered each village to stabilise the worship of Buddhas in the communal temple in 1231. The Lê rulers (1428–1789) furthered this policy by legitimating private temples built by the commoners (Ngô 2012: 59; Huynh et al. 1993: 20).

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