

Goddess Worship Belief at the Hoa's Temples in An Giang (Viet Nam)



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ABSTRACT: Since the end of the 18th century, the Hoa immigrant groups have been set foot on An Giang land. During 19th century, along with the process of settling in the new land, the the Hoa people have built facilities to serve their different needs of material and spiritual life. The Hoa's temples have been established and taken the role of spiritual and religious institutions, which have been preserving the customs, traditions and culture from the Hoa's homeland. One of these religions was a goddess belief. Over the past two centuries, the worship of the Goddess at the Hoa's temples in An Giang has followed their ancestors' tradition. In the current international integration context, these unique heritage values need to be preserved and promoted.

KEYWORDS: An Giang, preservation, the Hoa's temples, promoting, Goddess religion.

INTRODUCTION

An Giang is a province located in the Mekong Delta region (a part of South-western Vietnam). The province has its natural area of 3,536km², with the population of 1,908,352 people in 2019 (General Statistics Office, 2020, page 39). Until 2023, An Giang province consists of 11 administrative units, including 2 cities (Long Xuyen, Chau Doc), 1 town (Tan Chau), and 8 districts (An Phu, Chau Phu, Chau Thanh, Cho Moi, Phu Tan, Thoai Son, Tinh Bien, Tri Ton), with 156 administrative units at commune level, comprising 21 wards, 19 townships, and 116 communes. Among them, 2 districts, Tinh Bien and Tri Ton, are recognized as mountainous districts. An Giang currently has 4 main ethnic groups: Kinh, Hoa, Khmer, and Cham (An Giang Provincial Party Committee's Electronic Portal, 2023).

The historical process of the An Giang region demonstrates that alongside the diligent efforts of Kinh people in exploration and development, there has also been the contribution of other resident communities, including multiple generations of the Hoa community. The presence of Hoa's temples in An Giang, along with the worship of the Goddess at these historical sites, has affirmed the settlement process of Hoa people here and their role in the area of An Giang throughout the history.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main research subject of this article is the Goddess worship belief at Hoa's temples in An Giang province. The main research method is the research method of historical science and archaeology. Based on field surveys of the system of Hoa's temples existing in An Giang province, the article deeply investigates the belief of Goddess worship at these historical sites. Additionally, interdisciplinary method (public policy, conservation, ethnology, cultural studies, sociology, tourism...) and comparative research are utilized to solve the addressed issues as well as propose solutions for heritage conservation and promotion in the current context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Overview of the history of the Hoa community's migration to An Giang and their temples

The Southern region played a crucial role in the process of the Hoa's settlement in Vietnam. Around the mid-17th century, the first Hoa settlers arrived at Cu Lao Pho on the Dong Nai River, Gia Dinh (present-day Ho Chi Minh City) and later Sai Gon. In 1679, a group of Chinese generals including Chen Shangchuan and Yang Yandi, landed at Da Nang (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2005, p.110). A significant number of these Chinese migrants were permitted by the Nguyen lords to settle and thrive in the Southern region. Chen Shangchuan settled in Bien Hoa – Cu Lao Pho (Dong Nai province), while Yang Yandi settled in My Tho (Tien Giang province). Mo Jiu and his family arrived at Mang Kham (Ha Tien, Kien Giang province nowadays). With its geographical location, convenient transportation on water and land, and other favorable conditions, the land of An Giang attracted Chinese migrants to

Goddess Worship Belief at the Hoa's Temples in An Giang (Viet Nam)

settle relatively early. Since the late 18th century, a large number of Hoa people have arrived in An Giang. These immigrants came from the groups in Ha Tien region of Mo Jiu or My Tho of Yang Yandi and their descendants.

Overall, the Hoa population in An Giang developed fairly rapidly throughout different historical periods. After 1975, the Hoa population in An Giang continued to grow. Following the statistics from An Giang province in August 1983, the Hoa population occupied 17,000 people (Lam Tam, 1994, p.7). According to official population census data at the end of 2019, there were 5,234 Hoa people in An Giang (accounting for 0.27% of the total population of the province) (General Statistics Office, 2020, p.194).

In An Giang, the majority of Hoa people reside in urban areas, commercial centers. They are concentrated in two cities: Long Xuyen and Chau Doc. Additionally, a small number of Hoa people live in rural areas, scattering throughout districts such as Tinh Bien, Tri Ton, Chau Phu, etc. Alongside the settlement process, the Hoa people has established economic, cultural, and social institutions to stabilize their lives, meet religious needs, preserve their cultural identity while integrating with the local community. One of the significant institutions is the temples.

The term "Miếu" (temple) is written in Chinese characters as 廟 or 庙. Both Han-Vietnamese and modern Vietnamese dictionaries define "miếu" as a temple located in front of the royal palace, where the king's parents, grandparents, or ancestors are worshiped, a place to worship spirits, deities and so on (Thieu Chuu, 2004, p.180) or a place to worship deities (or deified figures), a small shrine (Language Institute, 2003, p.632).

The temples of the Hoa community in An Giang date back to the 19th or 20th century and have been renovated. According to our statistics, up to now, in An Giang province, Hoa's temples are concentrated in Long Xuyen City, Chau Doc City, Chau Phu district, Tinh Bien district, and Tan Chau town.

2. The system of goddess worshipped at the Hoa's temples in An Giang

The Hoa's temples in An Giang also have a various and diverse array of deities worshipped. The commonly worshipped deities include Tianhou Shengmu, Guan Sheng Di Jun (Holy Emperor Lord Guan), and Ong Bon. Additionally, there are other deities like Beidi (Beidi temple, My Long ward, Long Xuyen City), Lords of the Three Mountains (Ong Bon Temple, Vinh My ward, Chau Doc City), and Baosheng Dadi (Baosheng Temple, My Duc commune, Chau Phu district). These temples also worship other gods along with the main gods, such as Songzi Niangniang, Guanyin, Fude Zhengshen, Buddha Shakyamuni, Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, Jade Emperor, Confucius (Guandi Temple, Chau Phu A ward, Chau Doc City), Left and Right God's Guards, and others.

A survey of 18 Hoa's temples in An Giang revealed that the majority of the relics worship female deities (15 temples). The female deities commonly worshipped include Tianhou Shengmu, Zhu Sheng Niangniang, Wuxing Niangniang, and Guanyin.

2.1. Tianhou Shengmu or Mazu

Tianhou “天后” is a legendary figure in Chinese history. According to folklore, Tianhou was born at the end of spring, on the 23rd day of the third lunar month in the year 960, during the reign of Emperor Taizu of the Song Dynasty, on Meizhou Island in Fujian Province. She was given the name Lin Mo, also known as Moniang (the Silent Girl), as she did not cry at birth. From a young age, Moniang was known for her intelligence and kindness. At the age of 13, Moniang was taught secret techniques by a Taoist master. When she was 15, she looked for a master on a mountainous area and dedicated herself to being an apprentice. At the age of 16, she discovered 2 bronze amulets (amulet drawn on bronze tablet) inside the well, granting her the ability to control the weather and perform miracles. She was famous for venturing out to sea to rescue people drowned offshore and subduing evil deities such as Qianliyan and Shunfenger. In the fourth year of the reign of Emperor Zhao Guangyi in 978, Moniang passed away at the age of 28. Throughout various dynasties such as Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing, she was posthumously honored by the emperors on 28 occasions. She is revered under different names by different communities, such as Mazu in Fujian and Hainan, Holy Lady in Guangdong, and Matsu in Taiwan, etc. (Tran Hong Lien, 2007, p. 354-355; Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2006, p. 59-60). Through folklore, legends, and the worship of Tianhou Shengmu, she is depicted as a goddess of seafarers and merchants who involves in maritime trade (Ngo Duc Thinh, 2010, p. 354-355). As for religious perspective, Tianhou belief is one of the widespread beliefs among the Hoa community (Ngo Huu Thao, 2006, p.71-72), and she is worshipped in various forms across the globe, especially in regions with significant Chinese populations. In An Giang, Tianhou is worshipped in two main forms.

- Case 1: Tianhou as the main deity, with the relic named after her:

+ **Tianhou Temple:** located in Vinh My Ward, Chau Doc City. Since its establishment, the temple has undergone several renovations. The main deity worshipped here is Mazu.

+ **Tianhou Long Son Temple:** situated in Long Son Ward, Tan Chau Town. The main deity worshipped here is Mazu. Additionally, other deities are also worshipped here alongside Mazu including Tudigong (on the left) and Jiutian Xuannu (on the right).

+ **Tianhou Temple** (also called Lady Pagoda of Hakka Nation, Tianhou Hakka Temple): located in Tan Loi commune, Tinh Bien District. The main deity worshipped here is Tianhou.

- Case 2: Tianhou is worshipped on the left or on the right alongside main deity:

Goddess Worship Belief at the Hoa's Temples in An Giang (Viet Nam)

+ **Temple of God of the North** (Black Emperor Temple, Pagoda of God of the North, 廣東省會館 Guangdong Provincial Assembly Hall): located at 68 Pham Hong Thai Street, My Long Ward, Long Xuyen City. This is a Cantonese people's temple, built around the 19th century. From 1887 to 1891, this temple underwent a significant renovation thanks to the contribution of Quang Thanh Loi and Hoa Mau Xuong. In 1974, it was conducted another renovation. This temple honors deities such as Black Emperor in the middle of the Great Hall, Guan Gong (on the right) and Tianhou (on the left).

+ **Temple of Guandi** (Guandi Temple, Minh Huong Assembly Hall): situated at No.8, Le Minh Nguon Street, My Long Ward, Long Xuyen City. Built in the 19th century, this temple underwent renovation in 1974. The main deity worshipped here is Guan Sheng Di Jun, alongside Lady Tianhou (on the left) and other deities like Ong Bon, Ong Tao (the Kitchen God), and Tudigong (on the right).

+ **Temple of Guandi**: located in Chau Phu A Ward, Chau Doc City. This temple worships Guan Gong as the main deity, with Lady Tianhou and Fude Zhengshen (Tudigong) also worshipped here. Renovations were conducted in 1972, 1993, and 1997.

+ **Guandi Sheng Temple Cho Vam**: situated in Cho Vam Town, Phu Tan District. The main hall is dedicated to Guan Sheng Di Jun. Adjacent to the main hall are two chambers worshipping Fude Zhengshen (on the right) and Lady Tianhou (on the left).

+ **Guandi Temple My Duc**: located in My Pho Hamlet, My Duc Commune, Chau Phu District. The main hall worships Guan Sheng Di Jun, with two chambers dedicated to Fude Zhengshen (on the right) and Lady Tianhou (on the left).

+ **Ancient Guandi Temple**: situated in Long Son Ward, Tan Chau Town. The main hall worships Guan Sheng Di Jun, with two chambers dedicated to Fude Zhengshen (on the right) and Lady Tianhou (on the left).

+ **Ong Bon Temple** (Three Mountain Emperor Temple): located in Vinh My Ward, Chau Doc City. This temple, belonging to Teochew people, worships Lords of the Three Mountains, along with Left and Right God's Guards, and Tianhou.

+ **The second Lord Temple**: situated in Phuoc Quan Hamlet, Da Phuoc Commune, An Phu District. The main hall worships Second Lord of the Lords of Three Mountains, with two chambers dedicated to Fude Zhengshen (on the right) and Lady Tianhou Shengmu (on the left).

2.2. Mother Songzi

Mother Songzi, also known as Zhu Sheng Niangniang, Songzi Shengmu or Midwife Goddess, is revered as the deity specializing in assisting childbirth and nurturing children. Folk beliefs suggest that while parents play a part in conceiving a child, the involvement of Midwife Goddess is also crucial. Midwife Goddess is a collective term referring to 13 deities, including Songzi Shengmu and 12 Midwife Goddesses. At Hoa's temples in An Giang, Midwife Goddess is worshipped alongside other deities like Ong Bon, Guo Tian Wang, Shennong, Fude Zhengshen, etc.

- **That Phu Temple** (Ong Bon Temple, Fude Temple): located at No. 78, Pham Hong Thai Street, My Long Ward, Long Xuyen City. The temple worships Ong Bon, with Shennong and Mother Songzi also worshipped. The altar for Mother Songzi is placed on the right side of the Ong Bon altar.

- **Lord Guo Temple** (Long Son Palace): situated at No. 10, Le Minh Nguon Street, My Long Ward, Long Xuyen City. Belonging to Fujianese people, this temple worships Guo Tian Wang, along with Zhu Sheng Niangniang and Fude Zhengshen. The altar for Zhu Sheng Niangniang is placed on the left side of the Lord Guo altar.

2.3. Guanyin

Guanyin (Guanshiyin Bodhisattva) is regarded by the Hoa people as a savior, always bringing blessings and assistance to people in distress. Hoa people worship Guanyin to instill the values of mutual assistance and kindness among people, helping each other overcome difficulties for happiness and stability in life. For the Hoa, both Guanyin and Tianhou are benevolent goddesses who aid the community, so wherever Tianhou is worshipped, Guanyin is also worshipped. In An Giang, Guanyin is worshipped at Seven Fu Temple: in front of the altar of Ong Bon, there is an altar for Guanyin (alongside Buddha Shakyamuni and Dizang) in the "preceding Buddha, succeeding deities" style. Some Mother Goddess temples also worship Guanyin in front of the courtyard or in the form of hanging paintings on the walls.

2.4. Other Goddesses

At Hoa's temples, other goddesses are also worshipped, such as Wuxing Niangniang (the Five Elements Mothers - Wood, Metal, Water, Fire, Earth), Jiutian Xuannu (the Nine Heavenly Mystical Lady), Xiangu (Fairy Lady), etc.

Lady Tianhou Temple Long Son: located in Long Son Ward, Tan Chau Town. The Right Hall worships Jiutian Xuannu and Wuxing Niangniang. The relic also worships Xiangu and other deities.

Ong Bon Fude Zhengshen Temple: situated in Long Son Ward, Tan Chau Town. The main hall worships Lord Fude Zhengshen (Ong Bon), with two altars worshipping Wuxing Niangniang (on the left) and the Five Deities (on the right).

3. Current status of worship and religious activities towards the goddess

3.1. Architecture and worship artifacts associated with the goddess

At Hoa's temples, the focal point of worship activities lies in the main hall where the principal deity is enshrined. Flanking the main deity are two less important deities. Female deities, including Tianhou, are worshipped in two forms: as the main deity and alongside the main deity in a complementary role. Whether worshipped as the main deity or in a complementary role, the goddesses are honored with solemnity in the temple halls. In addition to the female deity statue, accompanying artifacts are often present to

Goddess Worship Belief at the Hoa's Temples in An Giang (Viet Nam)

extol the virtues of the deity, illustrate their legends, or facilitate worship activities. In the temples where female deities hold the primary position, they are worshipped in the central hall of the main sanctuary. In the temples where female deities are worshipped in a complementary role, they occupy slightly less prominent positions alongside the main deity's altar.

Tianhou is depicted with various titles such as 天后娘娘 "Tianhou Niangniang" (Heavenly Queen Mother), 天后聖母 "Tianhou Shengmu" (Heavenly Empress Mother), or 天上聖母 "Tianshang Shengmu" (Heavenly Supreme Holy Mother), and 天后元君 "Tianhou Yuan Jun" (Heavenly Original Sovereign). The term "Tianhou" is also associated with the names of relics "Miao" ("Mieu" in Vietnamese) (temple) and "Gong" ("Cung" in Vietnamese) (palace), indicating their function: "Tianhou Gong" (Tianhou Palace), "Shengmu Miao" (Shengmu Temple). According to Chinese beliefs, both "Gong" and "Miao" refer to these landmarks, with "Miao" being a more folk term and "Gong" being more formal. Some researchers suggest that originally "Gong" referred to the entire temple, later specifically denoting the main hall where the principal deity is enshrined (Tran Hong Lien, 2005, p.10-11).

At sites where Lady Tianhou is the principal deity, her name and titles are inscribed on the main gates and entrances of the temple complex, such as 天后宮 "Tianhou Gong" (Tianhou Palace), 天后聖廟 "Tianhou Shengmiao" (Tianhou Holy Temple) and so on. There is a slight divergence of the direction between the main gate of Tianhou Temple in Vinh My Ward, Chau Doc City, and the temple for feng shui reason. At Vinh My Tianhou Temple in Vinh My Ward, Chau Doc City, the main gate is decorated with a hengpi ("hoành phi" in Vietnamese) (horizontal lacquered board) inscribed 天后聖母廟 "Tianhou Shengmu miao" (Tianhou Holy Temple) and above the main way has a Vietnamese inscription as "THIÊN HẬU THÁNH MẪU". At the Thien Hau Temple in Long Son Ward, Tan Chau Town, the main gate bears the inscription "THIÊN HẬU THÁNH MẪU" in Vietnamese, and 天后聖母 "Tianhou Shengmu" in Han script.

Some typical artifacts used in the worship of the female deity include:

➤ "Khám thờ", statue and female deity shrine

"Khám thờ" (altar) is usually placed on a high pedestal. "Khám thờ" is made of wood with the height from 2 to 3 meters and the length from 1.5 to 2.5 meters. It is elaborately carved with many themes such as dragon, phoenix, flower and bird and so on. It also has hengpi and duilian for praising the goddess. In front of "khám thờ", there is "huong án" which usually includes 3 rows of large tables used to display incense, lamps, incense burners, and offerings to worship the goddess. The area to worship the deity is also considered a palace, where she resides and rests. Therefore, some temples also place an additional wardrobe with clothes inside, etc. Hanging on "khám thờ" are many fabric cloths with colorful embroidery and the deity's name.

The statue of the goddess is placed in the most solemn place of the relic's main hall. Most goddesses are worshiped in the form of round statues at the altars. Statues are made of ceramics, wood painted with gilded lacquer, composite materials, or made of paper mache, plaster etc. The worship statues are carved authentically as the artisans have expressed the spirit and style of the goddesses through their facial expressions and body shape to create the closeness with those who come to worship. Tianhou is often shown as a benevolent goddess, sitting on a throne, wearing a crown embroidered with a dragon and pearls and a red brocade robe with two maids on both sides. On Tianhou altar, there are often many statues of the deity with different sizes from large to small and often placed in order from high to low along the central vertical axis. These statues have their own functions. At the sacred worship ceremony, the large statue on the highest position will be brought to the yard in order for the deity to witness the festival; The average-size statue on the middle position will be placed on the altar and the bottom small statue will be put in a palanquin and paraded around the towns. Along with statues of female deities, there are often statues of servants next to them. At Beidi Temple, along with the statue of Tianhou, there are also statues of two maids, statues of Qianliyan (one who sees thousands of miles away) and Shunfenger (one who hears thousands of miles away) in a standing position which is ready to see and listen to worldly stories. The statue of Zhu Sheng Niangniang wears a crown and a dress embroidered with sequined brocade and is represented in the form of three deities. Wuxing Niangniang is represented in the form of 5 ladies, wearing crowns on their heads and robes wrapped around their bodies.

➤ Horizontal lacquered boards - hengpis, vertical lacquered boards - duilians, signboards (engraved with Chinese characters)

The temples worshipping the goddess all have hengpis, duilians, and "trường vải" (a large cloth with some words written on it) right above deity's worship space or surrounding areas. The content and purpose are to identify the monument worshipping her, recalling her homeland and her legend, praising her great merits, promoting her virtues and blessing and protection for the community.

At Temple of Lady Tianhou Vinh My: in the main hall of the Thien Hau temple, there are hengpis and "trường vải" engraved and embroidered with Chinese characters: 天后元君 "Tianhou Yuan Jun" 天后聖母 "Tianhou Shengmu", 天后廟 "Tianhou Miao". Temple of Lady Tianhou Long Son: in the area worshipping the deity, there are hengpis and "trường vải" engraved and embroidered with Chinese characters 天后聖母 "Tianhou Shengmu". At Temple of Guandi Sheng Cho Vam: the shrine of Lady Tianhou has a plaque engraved in Vietnamese characters "Thánh Mẫu nương nương". At Guandi Temple My Duc: the shrine of

Goddess Worship Belief at the Hoa's Temples in An Giang (Viet Nam)

Tianhou has a plaque engraved in Vietnamese "Bà Thiên Hậu" and a "trướng vải" printed in Chinese: 天后聖母 "Tianhou Shengmu". Ông Bồn Temple (Tam Sơn Temple) in Vinh My Ward, Chau Doc City, has a hengpi: 天后聖母 "Tianhou Shengmu". At Ông Bắc temple: the "trướng vải" hanging on the altar is embroidered: 天后聖母 "Tianhou Shengmu", the new signboard is engraved with both Chinese and Vietnamese characters: 天后聖母 "Thiên Hậu Thánh Mẫu".

Tianhou Temple (in Vinh My Ward, Chau Doc City): both sides of the gate have a duilian with the following content:

Original text: 天德高明保護村鄉和喜樂

后宮普照扶持社稷永康寧

Translation: Heavenly virtue protects the village to be always happy

The bower enlightens to keep the society forever peaceful.

➤ In addition, there are also artifacts showing the belief in worshipping the deity, such as votive tablets of Tianhou often placed in front of her statue; steles; pictures: paintings on the wall of her divine appearance on the waves to save people in distress, etc. A special artifact is the incense burners at Tianhou's altar. The incense burners often have inscriptions showing the aesthetic name of Tianhou, identifying the relics worshipping Tianhou or recording both the name of the temple and the names of the deities. At Ông Bắc temple, there is an alloy incense burner and an incense basin with the front of it engraved as 天后宮 "Tianhou Gong" (The palace of Tianhou), although the writing on the incense burner is much faded.

3.2. Religious belief practice Activities

3.2.1. Worship Activities

At Hoa's temples in An Giang, worship activities for female deities are often conducted right at the historical sites. Every day, these temples open their doors to welcome believers and visitors who come to light incense sticks, pay homage, pray for prosperity, luck, offspring, and blessings for a prosperous and happy life. In temples where the female deity is the main deity, believers (especially women) first come to light incense sticks and worship the her, before paying respects to other deities. In places where the female deity is worshipped alongside other deities, the offering of incense and prayers will come after paying respects to the main deity. After worshipping the main deity, visitors will then proceed to pay respects to the female deity and then to other deities.

The Hoa community organizes worship ceremonies at these temples on various occasions such as the first day of the lunar month (ngày Sóc), full moon days (ngày Vọng), or Buddhist holidays like the full moon day of the first lunar month (Rằm tháng Giêng), full moon day of the seventh lunar month (Rằm tháng Bảy), full moon day of the tenth lunar month (Rằm tháng Mười) and other festive occasions. Hoa's temples serve as cultural and folk religious centers for the community with various names such as "Miếu Ông" (Temple of Male Deity), "Miếu Bà" (Temple of Female Deity), "Chùa Ông" (Pagoda of Male Deity), or "Chùa Bà" (Pagoda of Female Deity). Besides worshipping female deities at temples, each family also sets up altars for deities with great solemnity. Though not as famous as temples dedicated to Bà Chúa Xứ (the divine lady who is the lord of the area), temples dedicated to Tianhou in An Giang are familiar places for locals and have long been destinations for pilgrims to entrust their faith.

3.2.2. Festivals

In addition to worship rituals, Hoa's temples also host festivals related to female deities. Especially on the "Vía" days of these goddesses, vibrant festival activities take place at the temple sites. Some notable festivals include:

Tianhou's Vía Festival: The Hoa community celebrates the day of Tianhou's birth, traditionally believed to be on the 23rd day of the third lunar month, as her Vía day. Hoa's temples in An Giang organize Tianhou's Vía Festival on the 23rd day of the third lunar month. Some major Vía festivals are large-scale and last for several days, such as at Tianhou Temple (also known as Temple of Hakka Lady); at Vinh My Tianhou Temple and Long Son Tianhou Temple, which hold a significant Tianhou Shengmu Festival on the 22nd, 23rd, and 24th days of the third lunar month. At Ông Bắc Temple, Guandi Temple (in Long Xuyen City), Ông Bồn Temple and Guandi Temple (in Chau Doc City), Vía festivals are also observed on the 23rd day of the third lunar month.

Guanyin Festival: In Hoa's temples dedicated to Guanyin, there are numerous annual worship ceremonies, including birthday celebrations (on the 18th and 19th days of the second lunar month), initiation ceremonies (on the 18th and 19th days of the sixth lunar month), and enlightenment ceremonies (on the 18th and 19th days of the ninth lunar month). Among these, the birthday celebration of Guanyin is the biggest. Additionally, worship of Guanyin is also performed during temple inaugurations or other deity worship ceremonies.

These festivals related to female deities are popular folk festivals within the Hoa community, reflecting spiritual beliefs and serving as distinctive features of Hoa's temples. They aim to praise the virtues of the female deities, express the community's reverence, revive traditional cultural values, and educate the younger generation about their ethnic beliefs.

During festival occasions, the entire temple management, associations, the Hoa community, as well as Vietnamese, Cham, and Khmer people in the province and neighboring areas gather to respectfully offer incense and participate in ritual activities. Local residents and tourists bring offerings such as fruits, roasted pigs, etc., to pray for peace in their lives. During these times, temples also host various social activities such as lantern auctions to raise funds for community welfare, charitable activities, or fundraising for the needy, providing scholarships to students, etc. These are cultural and religious activities that have existed for centuries,

Goddess Worship Belief at the Hoa's Temples in An Giang (Viet Nam)

servicing as an integral part of the spiritual life of the Hoa community and the local population as a whole. They fulfill spiritual needs while fostering strong bonds among different ethnic communities. Alongside temple worship activities, families with altars dedicated to female deities also conduct similar ceremonies.

4. Some remarks on the distinctive value of the worship of female deities and the role of the Hoa people in An Giang province.

The historical progression of the Southern land region demonstrates that alongside the pioneering efforts of the Vietnamese people, there has been a contribution from other communities, including generations of the Hoa people. Here, they were facilitated by the Nguyen dynasty to settle and thrive, collaborating in the exploration and development of new territories. The presence of Hoa's temples and the worship of female deities have left marks on the history of settlement and establishment of the Hoa community in An Giang province, highlighting the distinctive religious practices of the Hoa people. From the initial perception of being "foreign land" for the early generations of Hoa immigrants who came here to establish themselves, An Giang today has become the second homeland for the majority of Hoa people. Hoa's temples and the worship of female deities are evidence of the settlement process, development, and significant contributions of the Hoa community in the exploration and construction of the An Giang region.

Through the ups and downs of history, the worship of female deities has persisted to this day. Alongside the architecture of Hoa's temples, the arrangement of deity statues, the system of paintings, couplets, incense burners, etc., associated with the aesthetic names or teachings of the deities, have contributed to create a complete and solemn religious system, with high artistic and architectural value for the worship destinations. This religious worship serves both spiritual and cultural purposes, as well as technical and artistic ones, providing a means for people to communicate with the divine.

The worship of female deities in the temples represents the distinctive religious and cultural heritage of the Hoa people in An Giang. Wherever they go, the Hoa people carry their religious customs and the spirit of their ethnicity. Today, this religious beauty has blended into the Vietnamese cultural mainstream while still retaining its own values, reflecting the essence of Chinese culture. Worshipping the female deities primarily satisfies spiritual needs, reflects customs, traditions, and traditional beliefs, and expresses the benevolent aspirations of the Hoa community, demonstrating the gratitude of immigrants towards the deities who have assisted them, especially Tianhou. Not only does it reflect the preservation of folk religious beliefs, but also helps Hoa immigrants preserve the ethnic identity and create beautiful cultural achievements on the new land. This is also the basis for community cohesion, social order management. This also helps Hoa people quickly stabilize their lives.

The worship of female deities among the Hoa also demonstrates the exchange and transformation of cultures. When they arrived in new territories, traditional Chinese beliefs merged with indigenous beliefs. The worship of female deities among the Hoa in An Giang is the inheritance and promotion of Chinese cultural traditions in the Southern region in cultural exchange with Vietnamese, Khmer, Cham, and other ethnic groups. Over time, living together in a multi-ethnic, multicultural region, the worship of female deities among the Hoa has harmonized and interacted with the beliefs of the Vietnamese and other communities. Hoa's temples and the worship of female deities have become places where the sentiments and spirituality of not only the Hoa but also the Vietnamese, Cham, and Khmer people are deposited. The Hoa also incorporate and accept the worship of Vietnamese deities, and even Khmer deities. This is evident in the worship of Vietnamese deities such as Bà Chúa Xứ, Thành Hoàng Bồn Cảnh, Neak Tà, alongside Hoa deities like Tianhou in temples. For instance, Ông Bắc Pagoda and Lord Guo Temple in Long Xuyen, An Giang, where both Buddha and Bà Chúa Xứ are worshipped.

Conversely, although initially a goddess who specialized in aiding seafarers, upon arriving in new territories, the worship of Tianhou became localized and integrated into indigenous beliefs, being worshipped by both Hoa and Vietnamese people. At the Long Son Bà Chúa Xứ Temple (in Long Son Ward, Tan Chau Town), the main hall worships Bà Chúa Xứ, while the side halls worship Tianhou and other deities. At Thất Nương Thánh Temple, also known as the Bảy Bà Da Phuoc Temple (The temple of seven goddesses) (in Phuoc Tho Hamlet, Da Phuoc Commune, An Phu District), the seven mothers are worshipped, including Tianhou and Bà Chúa Xứ.

Especially in An Giang, Lady Tianhou serves various functions. As a female figure, she is worshipped with the hope of bringing blessings to women during pregnancy, childbirth, and ensuring the health of children, similar to the worship of Songzi (Ngo Duc Thinh, 2012, page 402). Tianhou gradually became seen by the people as a compassionate deity, rescuing and aiding people in need, spreading compassion like Guanyin Bodhisattva. Therefore, temples often worship both Tianhou and Guanyin Bodhisattva, following the model of "prioritizing Buddhas, followed by deities." Additionally, due to the influence of the market economy, Lady Tianhou, from being a "goddess of maritime protection" for the Hoa, has now also become a "goddess of commerce," "bestower of wealth and prosperity" for both Hoa and Vietnamese people (Ngo Huu Thao, 2006, page 39).

In summary, the worship of female deities, along with its unique cultural characteristics and values, has contributed to diversifying the religious and cultural activities of communities in the Southern region, enriching the cultural picture of Vietnam – a unified cultural foundation amidst diversity. At the same time, it also clearly demonstrates the process of integration of the Hoa people into the Vietnamese homeland community.

Goddess Worship Belief at the Hoa's Temples in An Giang (Viet Nam)

CONCLUSION

The process of building and developing the Southern region of Vietnam is closely associated with the collaboration of various ethnic communities such as the Vietnamese, Hoa, Khmer, Cham, etc. Among them, the Hoa community holds a particularly significant historical role. During their settlement and long-term residence in An Giang, the Hoa community brought along their ethnic beliefs to the new land, one of which is the worship of female deities. This is a familiar belief that originated from their homeland in China and was reestablished in the Southern region of Vietnam.

The system of female deities worshipped at Hoa's temples is quite diverse, with the most common one is Tianhou Shengmu. The worship of female deities is manifested through the practice of worship and various religious activities and festivals at historical sites. The unique values of the worship of female deities have contributed to diversifying the local culture, demonstrating the unity of ethnic groups, and notably contributing to the protection of the achievements in the exploration of the land. This also illustrates the concept of "owners of heritage" - how the Hoa pilgrims have gradually integrated into the larger family of the ethnic groups in Vietnam.

Today, the worship of female deities among the Hoa has merged into the broader flow of such worship in Vietnam and the world. The worship of female deities at Hoa's temples in An Giang contributes to diversifying the system of worship of Mother Goddess within the community of various ethnic groups in the Mekong Delta region. In the context of current international integration, these cultural values need to be studied, preserved, and promoted to preserve and enhance the heritage value of the community, meeting the requirements of sustainable development.

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Goddess Worship Belief at the Hoa's Temples in An Giang (Viet Nam)



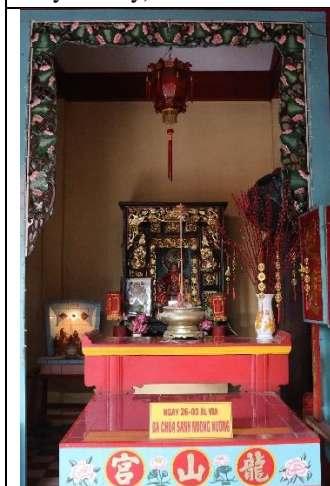
**Tianhou's Altar
at Guandi Temple**

(No. 08, Le Minh Nguon Street, My Long Ward, Long Xuyen City)



**Tianhou's Altar
at Ông Bắc Temple**

(No. 68, Pham Hong Thai Street, My Long Ward, Long Xuyen City)



Songzi Niangniang's Altar at Lord Guo Temple

(No.10, Le Minh Nguon Street, My Long Ward, Long Xuyen City)



Songzi Niangniang's Altar at Thất phủ Temple

(No.78, Pham Hong Thai Street, My Long Ward, Long Xuyen City)



Wuxing Niangniang's Altar at Ông Bôn Fude Zhengshen Temple

(Long Son Ward, Tan Chau Town)



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