

The Significance of the Saigon Ceramic Statue Set of the Three Great Emperor-Officials in the Lives of Local Residents

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the ceramic statue set of the Three Great Emperor-Officials (Tam Quan Đại Đế), an antique ensemble of nine statues dating from the early 20th century, produced by the Bửu Nguyên kiln in Đề Ngạn (Saigon). Through artefact analysis, iconographic interpretation, and interdisciplinary methods, the study deciphers the cultural and historical values embodied in the set, from the Han-script inscriptions “堤岸埠” (Đề Ngạn Phự – De Ngan Port) and “寶源造” (Bửu Nguyên Tạo – Made by Buu Nguyen) to the distinctive ceramic glazing techniques. The paper highlights two dimensions of significance: first, the set as an example of industrial heritage (a ceramic art form), and second, as a symbolic object of belief. The findings suggest that the statues vividly materialise the doctrine of the “celestial bureaucracy,” directly addressing communal needs for “granting blessings, pardoning sins, and praying for health.” Moreover, the set stands as a quintessential testament to the cultural identity of Saigon - Southern Vietnam, characterised by profound religious syncretism (Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism) and a dynamic process of creative indigenisation. Ultimately, the study clarifies the close interconnection between Saigon’s ceramic technology and the belief-driven practices of the Southern Vietnam community in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

KEYWORDS: Three Great Emperors - Officials, Southern Vietnam beliefs, culture, Saigon ceramics

1. INTRODUCTION

Belief-related and religious artifacts occupy a central position in archaeological and cultural studies. They are not merely artistic creations that demonstrate technical skill and aesthetic refinement, but also cultural testimonies that encapsulate profound insights into the worldviews, value systems, social structures, and spiritual lives of past communities.

In Vietnam, the Southern Vietnam region, particularly old Saigon, today’s Cholon, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, represented an exceptionally rich and diverse cultural and religious landscape. As a dynamic economic and social hub, Saigon-Cholon became a locus of convergence and syncretism, where Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and the folk traditions of Vietnamese, Chinese, and other resident communities intertwined.

Within this context, the worship of the Three Great Emperor-Officials (三官大帝), a Taoist pantheon of deities, was introduced and swiftly responded to the pressing spiritual needs of local inhabitants. Yet, research into the material expressions of such beliefs often encounters obstacles, largely due to fragmented sources and isolated artefacts that lack their original contextual framework.

The discovery and authentication of a complete, synchronous set of the Three Great Emperor-Officials statues comprising nine figures, dating to the early 20th century, and bearing explicit inscriptions of provenance, thus constitutes a scholarly event of exceptional importance. With Han-script inscriptions reading “堤岸埠” (Đề Ngạn Phự) and “寶源造” (Bửu Nguyên Tạo), the collection confirms its origin from the renowned Bửu Nguyên kiln in Đề Ngạn (Saigon). This article undertakes a comprehensive analysis of this unique antique set to elucidate its multifaceted cultural significance, positioning it as both a marker of the identity of old Saigon - Cholon in particular and of the Southern Vietnam region more broadly.

2. OVERVIEW OF THE BỬU NGUYÊN KILN CERAMIC STATUE SET OF THE THREE GREAT EMPEROR-OFFICIALS

The antique ensemble comprises nine statues, arranged into three groups that correspond to the Three Officials and their attendant figures. This collection stands as a remarkable testament to the technical mastery and artistic sophistication achieved by Saigon’s ceramic tradition in the early 20th century.

2.1. The Celestial Official Great Emperor Statue Set

The Celestial Official group vividly embodies the function of bestowing blessings. At its centre stands the Celestial Official Great Emperor, the largest figure in the ensemble, measuring 90 cm in height and 38 cm in width, and enthroned upon a stately pedestal (38 × 44.5 × 12.4 cm). Seated in a dignified, static posture, the Emperor wears a round-topped headdress, a variant of the Great Court hat, signifying authority and solemnity. His visage is rendered with striking benevolence: a gentle smile, open eyes, and prominently sculpted ears together convey the image of a supreme deity whose role is to dispense blessings and divine favour.

The Celestial Official's role is further articulated through the presence of two standing attendants, each dressed in long robes adorned with *mandarin squares* featuring phoenix motifs, water waves, and symmetrical cloud patterns, emblems traditionally signifying the rank of civil officials. Both figures wear sashes and boots, reinforcing their bureaucratic identity. Positioned to the right of the Celestial Official, one attendant dons an ivory-white robe with green shoulders and holds a calligraphy brush in a poised manner, symbolising the act of recording. To the left, the second attendant wears a green robe with blue shoulders and carries a scroll, one end resting upon his left shoulder, evoking the imagery of official documentation. Each statue measures 69 cm in height, and together they transform the altar into a celestial court, where merits are inscribed and judgments ratified. These iconographic details vividly materialise the administrative authority of the Celestial Official, the divine registrar of heavenly merits, sins, and blessings.

The entire ensemble radiates an atmosphere of solemnity, order, and the commanding presence of a universal administrative centre. Its iconography directly corresponds to the doctrinal function of *Thiên Quan Từ Phúc* (天官賜福), the Celestial Official bestowing blessings upon the mortal realm. The benevolent countenance of the Celestial Official, characterised by a gentle smile and composed dignity, together with the presence of his civil attendants, visually materialises his role as the “supreme official of the celestial court”, the divine authority entrusted with receiving petitions and sanctioning fortune.

2.2. The Terrestrial Official Great Emperor Statue Set

In contrast to the Celestial Official, the Terrestrial Official group conveys the solemnity required for judgment. The Terrestrial Official Great Emperor, measuring 77.5 cm in height and 38 cm in width, is likewise enthroned and distinguished by his *Bình Thiên* (flat-heaven) hat. The most striking difference lies in his facial expression: sculpted with a rounded visage, protruding eyes, and a slightly pursed mouth, it projects majesty tempered by a stern, judicial gravity. His long robe is richly adorned, featuring raised dragons on both shoulders with forward-facing heads, water-wave motifs at the hem, and a central lapel decorated with floral patterns. A sash and boots complete the attire, reinforcing his authoritative presence. Of particular archaeological significance is the clear inscription on the pedestal, which records both the place of production “*堤岸埠*” (*Đề Ngan Phụ – De Ngan Port*) and the kiln's name, “*寶源造*” (*Bửu Nguyên tạo – Made by Buu Nguyen*), thereby confirming its provenance.

Flanking the Emperor are two attendants, each approximately 66 - 68 cm tall, clad in robes decorated with *mandarin squares* featuring phoenix motifs. Their hands are positioned to hold ritual objects or scrolls, underscoring their auxiliary role in administering terrestrial justice. While their iconography parallels that of the Celestial Official's attendants, they are distinguished by tall, round hats, marking their specific function within this group.

The Terrestrial Official's majestic yet austere visage aligns precisely with the doctrinal role of *Địa Quan xá tội* (地官赦罪), the Terrestrial Official who pardons sins. This pardoning, however, is not a simple act of grace; it presupposes the rigorous



Figure 1: The Celestial Official Great Emperor Statue Set.

Source: Photo by Lê Thanh Nghĩa



Figure 2: The Terrestrial Official Great Emperor Statue Set.

Source: Photo by Lê Thanh Nghĩa

The Significance of the Saigon Ceramic Statue Set of the Three Great Emperor-Officials in the Lives of Local Residents

examination and equitable judgment of the transgressions of both the living and the departed. Accordingly, his image embodies the authority and severity indispensable to the execution of justice in the terrestrial realm.

2.3. The Water Official Great Emperor Statue Set

The Water Official Great Emperor stands 78.2 cm tall and closely parallels the form of the Terrestrial Official, wearing a *Bình Thiên* (flat-heaven) hat and a dragon robe. His facial features, however, are distinct: a rounded visage, open eyes, and a slight smile convey a harmonious balance of majesty and benevolence. The robe is richly ornamented, with raised dragons on both shoulders facing forward and water-wave motifs along the hem. Of particular iconographic significance is the raised Hán character “壽” (*Shou* – Longevity), rendered in seal script and embellished with floral and foliate motifs on the chest-piece. This sophisticated detail represents a highly creative interpretation.

The Water Official’s doctrinal role is *Thủy Quan giải ách* (水官解厄), alleviating calamities and delivering beings from disaster. By incorporating the symbol *Shou*, the artisans ingeniously linked the removal of misfortune with humanity’s deepest aspiration for longevity and peace. This innovation stands as a clear testament to the process of indigenisation and the enrichment of Taoist symbolism within the cultural context of Southern Vietnam.

As with the Terrestrial Official, the Water Official statue bears inscriptions confirming its provenance: “堤岸埠” (Đề Ngạn Phự – De Ngan Port, i.e., Saigon River Port) and “寶源造” (Bửu Nguyên Tạo – Made by Buu Nguyen), identifying the renowned Bửu Nguyên kiln as its place of production. These inscriptions not only authenticate the artefact but also reinforce the documentary value of the entire collection. “Đề Ngạn Phự” (堤岸埠), in which the place name 堤岸 “Đề Ngạn” is how the Chinese referred to the Cholon area, and the character 埠 “Phự” has two meanings: a port, a pier, or a market on a riverbank or coast¹. The term “Đề Ngạn Phự” can be understood simply as *Cholon Port*, denoting a trading hub or marketplace situated along the Cholon canal. In the old Cholon area, a dense network of rivers and canals structured the urban landscape. Among them, the Cholon canal originated from the Tau Hu canal at the present-day intersection of Hai Thuong Lan Ong and Vo Van Kiet streets and meandered westward to connect with the Lo Gom (Kiln) canal. The junction of these two waterways corresponds to the current intersection of Le Quang Sung and Pham Dinh Ho streets.

Inscriptions such as “Bửu Nguyên Tạo” (寶源造 – Made by Bửu Nguyên), together with others including “Đề Ngạn Châu Thành” (De Ngan Citadel) and “Nam Kỳ Đề Ngạn, Lò Gốm Nhai” (Cochinchina De Ngan, Kiln Street), provide firm archaeological and epigraphic evidence for locating the Buu Nguyen kiln. The kiln was situated along the Lo Gom and Cholon canals, on *Quai de Lo Gom* (now Le Quang Sung Street), within Binh Tay village at the time. Today, this historically significant site corresponds to the grounds of Chi Lăng Primary School (199/31 Le Quang Sung Street, Binh Tay Ward, Ho Chi Minh City). Notably, in the alley beside the school, there is still a small shrine under a banyan tree – this was the Xa Cong (Communal Deity) shrine of the Buu Nguyen kiln in the past².



Figure 3: The Water Official Great Emperor Statue Set

Source: Photo by Lê Thanh Nghĩa

¹ Lê Trung Hoa (ed), 2003. Dictionary of Place Names in Saigon - Ho Chi Minh City, Trê Publishing House HCMC. p 127.

² Nguyễn Hữu Lộc, 2025. New discovery about the Bửu Nguyên Kiln – Through inscriptions on products. Symposium Proceedings - Ho Chi Minh City History Museum, p 28-29.

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE THREE GREAT EMPEROR-OFFICIALS STATUE SET

Regarding materials: The statues were crafted from local plastic clay, extracted from ancient alluvial clay mines along Saigon's canals (such as Ruột Ngựa canal, Lò Gốm canal, Xóm Đất)³. The artisans demonstrated a profound understanding of the scientific properties of their materials, skillfully combining plastic clay (rich in kaolin) with “lean materials” or non-plastic fillers



Figure 4. The characters "Đề Ngạn Phụ" and "Bửu Nguyên tạo" on the base of the Terrestrial Official Great Emperor statue.

Source: Photo by Lê Thanh Nghĩa



Figure 5. The characters "Đề Ngạn Phụ"

Source: Photo by Lê Thanh Nghĩa



Figure 6. The characters "Bửu Nguyên tạo"

Source: Photo by Lê Thanh Nghĩa

such as feldspar, serving as a flux, and quartz, providing structural stability and reducing shrinkage. This meticulous composition ensured the durability and integrity of large-scale ceramic products.

Regarding shaping techniques: The artisans of the Bửu Nguyên kiln demonstrated remarkable technical versatility by masterfully integrating multiple production methods. The principal bodies and monumental thrones were fashioned through the traditional hand-coiling technique, imparting a sense of vitality and organic dynamism to the forms. In contrast, details requiring precision and uniformity, such as crowns, facial features, hands, and the intricate motifs of dragon robes, were produced using moulds and subsequently affixed to the main structure. This approach reflects a “modular production” mindset, a sophisticated synthesis of craft tradition and pragmatic efficiency. It enabled the statues to satisfy the ritual and aesthetic standards expected of worship objects, while simultaneously preserving their artistic individuality and expressive character.

Regarding ritual details: All three principal statues contain a square aperture at the back, an intentionally crafted feature known as “*Yếm tâm tượng*” (Statue Heart Consecration). This cavity was designed to house sacred items such as scriptures or ritual objects during the consecration ceremony. Through this ritual act, the statue was symbolically “breathed into life,” affecting its transformation from a mere ceramic artefact into a vessel endowed with spiritual presence and divine efficacy.

³ Nguyen Thi Hau, Survey of the kitchen stove potters' hamlet in Phú Định village (District 6 - HCMC). Scientific Reports, 2, p 129-133.

The Significance of the Saigon Ceramic Statue Set of the Three Great Emperor-Officials in the Lives of Local Residents

Regarding glaze and firing techniques: The set demonstrates the masterful use of two characteristic glaze lines. The three main statues are covered in a yellow glaze or “eel-skin glaze”, a traditional ash-silicate glaze with iron oxide (Fe₂O₃) as the main colourant, which was found in relatively high content when excavating and analysing samples at the Hung Lợi kiln, giving it a contemplative, warm hue⁴. The six attendant statues are finished in polychrome glaze, a pinnacle of ceramic artistry that required exceptional technical mastery. Each detail was meticulously painted with metal oxides such as cobalt and copper to achieve vivid colouration and subtle tonal variation. These works were most likely fired in large-scale facilities, such as *dragon kilns* (龍窯), where the use of saggars protected the delicate glazes and intricate surface details from damage during firing. The application of such advanced methods reflects not only the artisans’ consummate skill but also the existence of a highly organised production system, capable of balancing artistic refinement with technical precision.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE THREE GREAT EMPEROR-OFFICIALS STATUE SET

4.1. Belief Significance

The origin of this belief is a complex development process, from nature worship to systematisation and personification.

Natural origins: Initially, this was the worship of the three most basic natural forces of the universe: Heaven (Thiên), Earth (Địa), and Water (Thủy)⁵.

The “Bureaucratisation” process by Taoism: A decisive turning point emerged during the Eastern Han dynasty, when Zhang Daoling established the *Way of the Celestial Masters* in 142 CE. This movement systematised and effectively “bureaucratized” the supernatural realm, transforming it into an administrative apparatus with clearly defined functions. A paradigmatic example is the ritual of *Tam Quan Thủ Thư* (三官手書), or *Petitions to the Three Officials*, in which illness was interpreted as the karmic consequence of sin. The afflicted individual was required to compose three written confessions: one offered to Heaven through burning, another submitted to Earth through burial, and a third consigned to Water through immersion. This triadic ritual not only illustrates the doctrine of the Three Officials but also reflects the integration of moral accountability, ritual practice, and cosmic order within early Daoist religious life. Furthermore, this ritual assigned specific judicial functions to the three natural forces: the Celestial Official grants blessings (賜福), the Terrestrial Official pardons sins (赦罪), and the Water Official alleviates calamities (解厄)⁶.

The “Calendarization” process: This belief was consolidated and firmly embedded into cultural and social life through a process of “calendarization,” whereby it became associated with the *Tam Nguyên* (Three Yuan) festivals, three major ritual occasions held annually on the fifteenth day of the lunar month.

- *Thượng Nguyên (Upper Prime - 15th day of the 1st month):* Veneration day of the Celestial Official, an occasion to pray for blessings and peace for the new year.
- *Trung Nguyên (Middle Prime - 15th day of the 7th month):* Veneration day of the Terrestrial Official, an occasion when the Terrestrial Official pardons the sins of souls.
- *Hạ Nguyên (Lower Prime - 15th day of the 10th month):* Veneration day of the Water Official, an occasion to give thanks and pray for the removal of calamities.

The “Personification” process: To render the belief more accessible, abstract theological concepts were personified. Beyond the Taoist paradigm which maintains that the Three Officials were “formed from the transformation of *qi*”, folk culture reinterpreted them through a Confucian lens, identifying the deities with the three ancient sage-kings: Yao (堯) as the Celestial Official, Shun (舜) as the Terrestrial Official, and Yu (禹) as the Water Official. This association was grounded in the exemplary merits of these rulers: Yao’s regulation of the seasons, Shun’s model of filial piety, and Yu’s mastery over floods, each corresponding to the functional domains of the respective deities. In essence, this represents a process of “Confucianizing a Taoist concept,” whereby cosmological doctrines were harmonised with Confucian moral exemplars to enhance their resonance within the cultural imagination.

4.2. Significance of the statue set linked to the cultural identity of Saigon and Southern Vietnam

The Bửu Nguyên kiln’s statue set of the Three Great Emperor-Officials is a complex cultural heritage, carrying profound significance beyond being a mere object of worship. It converges and clearly reflects the characteristic cultural identity of Saigon-Cholon and Nam Bộ.

A symbol of an urban industry

The statue set itself is a “primary source” document about the economic, social, and industrial life of old Saigon.

⁴ Nguyen Thi Hau, Đặng Văn Thang. (2001). Production techniques of the ancient Hung Lợi kiln (District 8 - Ho Chi Minh City). *Journal of Archaeology*, No. 2, pp. 101-122.

⁵ DORÉ, S. J. H. (1931). *Researches into Chinese superstitions: Taoist personages*. (D.J. Finn, Trans.). T’usewei Printing Press. Tr 31.

⁶ TEISER, S. F. (2020). *The ghost festival in medieval China*. Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1988)

The Significance of the Saigon Ceramic Statue Set of the Three Great Emperor-Officials in the Lives of Local Residents

- *Evidence of a specialised urban society*: The existence of such a large-scale, exquisite, and costly statue set not only fulfilled ritual and devotional needs but also reflected the sophistication of an increasingly urbanised society in Saigon-Cholon. By the early 20th century, a vibrant market for high-end artistic ceramics had emerged, driven primarily by the patronage of Chinese congregations and large temples. To satisfy this demand, the Saigon ceramics industry developed a clear division of labour and specialised production processes. Within this context, the Buu Nguyen kiln distinguished itself as a recognised brand, renowned for its mastery in producing high-quality religious statuary and architectural ceramics.
- *Affirming the “Saigon Ceramics Brand”*: The inscriptions “*De Ngan Phu*” and “*Bửu Nguyên Tạo*” serve as crucial archaeological markers, enabling both the dating and provenance of the collection. They constitute material evidence that not only confirms the existence of the Buu Nguyen kiln but also attests to its reputation within the ceramic industry of early 20th-century Saigon. Moreover, the statue set crafted through a sophisticated combination of hand-coiling and moulding techniques, together with the artisans’ mastery of local materials, has become an invaluable reference point for identifying the distinctive stylistic characteristics of old Saigon ceramics.

The syncretism and indigenisation of Southern Vietnam culture

The reception, practice, and materialisation of the belief in the Three Officials vividly illustrate the open-minded, pragmatic, and inventive spirit characteristic of Saigon - Southern Vietnam culture.

Syncretism of “Three Teachings as One”: The belief in the Three Great Emperor-Officials constitutes a quintessential example of the “*Three Teachings harmonised as one*” (*Tam giáo đồng nguyên*) phenomenon within Southern Vietnam folk religious practice. Its most striking expression appears in the *Trung Nguyên* festival, held on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month. Here, the Taoist doctrine of the Terrestrial Official’s role in “pardoning the sins of souls” converges seamlessly with the Buddhist narrative of the Venerable Maudgalyāyana’s rescue of his mother from the hungry ghost realm during the Ullambana Festival. This confluence generated a richly layered ritual tradition recognised as the Festival for the Pardoning of Lost Souls, or the “Month of Lonely Spirits.” It stands as a remarkably resilient cultural-religious complex in which the teachings of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism do not exclude one another but instead interweave, complementing and reinforcing each other in practice.

A creative indigenisation process: The statue set is not a mere “slavish copy” but rather a product of adaptation and creative innovation. Its most distinctive and valuable iconographic feature is the appearance of the Hán character “壽” (*Shou* – Longevity), rendered in seal script on the chest-piece of the Water Official Great Emperor. While his doctrinal function is *Thủy Quan giải ách* - the alleviation of calamities and the salvation of beings from disaster, the artisans of the Bửu Nguyên kiln introduced the *Shou* motif as a sophisticated reinterpretation. By doing so, they directly associated the removal of misfortune with humanity’s most profound and practical aspiration: longevity and a long, peaceful life. This creative intervention stands as compelling evidence of the process of indigenisation and the enrichment of Taoist symbolism within the cultural context of Southern Vietnam.

In other words, the statue set represents the application of Saigon ceramic techniques to regional materials within a distinctly local cultural environment, thereby producing an artistic style that simultaneously bears the imprint of Southern China and embodies the “distinct tastes and psyche of the Vietnamese community in the Southern Vietnam region.” It stands as a compelling testament to the intimate interrelationship between material production technology and the spiritual-religious life of Saigon-Southern Vietnam during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

5. CONCLUSION

The statue set of the Three Great Emperor-Officials, as a ceramic masterpiece, occupies a special and profound place in the spiritual life of the people of Southern Vietnam. That such an exquisite ensemble was produced by a renowned Saigon kiln like Buu Nguyen, employing advanced techniques, not only testifies to local pride in craftsmanship but also reflects the community’s demand for and access to high-quality ritual objects worthy of their faith.

More significantly, for local residents, the statue set embodied the doctrine of the *celestial bureaucracy* within the *Tam Quan* belief system. In venerating the Great Emperors enthroned in courtly robes and bearing symbolic seals, worshippers perceived not only divine figures but also a cosmic order underpinned by law and justice. This provided a spiritual anchor and a visual affirmation that all human actions were observed and judged by the “celestial court.”

The distinctive creativity expressed through the *Shou* (Longevity) symbol on the Water Official’s dragon robe offers compelling evidence of the process of indigenisation. It demonstrates that the people of Southern Vietnam did not passively inherit the doctrine but actively enriched it, transforming an abstract theological concept into a familiar emblem deeply infused with their practical aspiration for longevity and a peaceful life in a new land.

At the same time, the statue set stands as the embodiment of Saigon-Cholon’s cultural identity. As a product of Vietnamese-Chinese technical exchange, grounded in local materials and aesthetic sensibilities, it became part of a shared consciousness in which communities coexisted and cultivated a diverse spiritual life distinctive to Southern Vietnam.

In conclusion, the Three Great Emperor-Officials statue set is not merely a documentary heritage of Saigon’s ceramic technology. Above all, it is a living testament to the intimate interweaving of material production and spiritual belief, a synthesis that directly shaped the consciousness of local residents in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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