

Bắc Đế Temple in Long Xuyên, an Giang: An Analysis of Artistic Value from an Archaeological Perspective

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ABSTRACT: Bắc Đế Temple (北帝廟, Beidi Miao) located in Long Xuyên Ward (An Giang) represents a quintessential religious edifice of the Hoa community (Chinese immigrants in Vietnam) originated from Guangdong, reflecting aesthetic values, architectural and sculptural artistry, as well as local cultural identity. This study approaches the temple from an archaeological perspective combined with interdisciplinary analysis, thereby elucidating its current condition, artistic significance, social role, and proposing sustainable conservation strategies within the contemporary context.

KEYWORDS: Bắc Đế Temple; Archaeology; Religious Architecture

1. INTRODUCTION

In the historical process of formation and development in Southern Vietnam, the Hoa community left significant imprints in the cultural and religious spheres, among which the system of temples (miếu thờ) constitutes a distinctive architectural type that simultaneously reflects spiritual life and embodies refined technical and artistic achievements. In Long Xuyên Ward (An Giang), Bắc Đế Temple (北帝廟, Beidi Miao), also known as Chùa Ông Bắc (Ông Bắc Pagoda), stands as one of the most representative monuments of the Cantonese (廣東, Guangdong) community, bearing particular value for the study of Chinese architectural and sculptural arts in the riverine environment of Southern Vietnam. This was the first Assembly Hall (Hội quán, 會館, huiguan) of the Hoa community in An Giang. The monument carries not only religious significance—as a sanctuary dedicated to Bắc Đế Trấn Vũ (北帝鎮武, Beidi Zhenwu), an important protective deity in Daoist belief—but also functioned as a communal hub, hosting characteristic cultural and festival activities.

Previous studies on the religious architecture of the Hoa community in Hội An (Võ & Đào, 2015), Hồ Chí Minh City (Trần, 2023), and Đồng Nai (Nguyễn, K.N.) have often emphasized artistic diversity and local acculturation. However, Bắc Đế Temple (北帝廟, Beidi Miao) in Long Xuyên has received relatively little systematic scholarly attention. Approaching this monument from an archaeological perspective thus provides new insights into processes of cultural interaction and adaptation.

This study seeks to analyze the artistic values of Bắc Đế Temple through its architectural and sculptural elements, while also assessing its role as cultural heritage within the Hoa community of An Giang. Its novelty lies in an interdisciplinary approach—integrating archaeology, art history, and heritage studies—to reaffirm Bắc Đế Temple not only as a site of religious and devotional practice but also as a cultural symbol contributing to the plural identity of contemporary Southern Vietnam.

2. THEORETICAL BASIS

The study of Bắc Đế Temple (北帝廟, Beidi Miao) from an archaeological perspective requires situating it within an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates cultural heritage studies, archaeology, and art history. The monument is not merely regarded as a religious structure, but also as a reflection of the identity and communal cohesion of the Hoa (華人, Huaren) community in An Giang.

From an archaeological perspective, Bắc Đế Temple (北帝廟, Beidi Miao) may be approached as a “living monument”—where construction materials, carving techniques, and decorative motifs preserve traces of cultural transformation. This approach enables the recognition of heritage not merely as an architectural or artistic product, but also as historical evidence that reflects the processes of migration, integration, and Hoa–Vietnamese (華–越, Hua–Yue) cultural interaction in Southern Vietnam.

In addition, theories of religious architecture emphasize the role of temples as socio-spiritual spaces. The architecture and artistic expressions within the temple serve not only ritual purposes but also embody a symbolic system intertwined with

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the moral concepts, cosmological views, and aesthetic sensibilities of the Cantonese (廣東, Guangdong) community. Accordingly, analyzing Bắc Đế Temple (北帝廟, Beidi Miao) within this theoretical framework contributes to clarifying both its aesthetic values and its significance as cultural heritage.

3. RESEARCH CONTENT

3.1. Current condition of the relic

The Cantonese Assembly Hall (廣東會館, Guangdong Huiguan) is no longer active as it once was; at present, it serves solely as a place of worship for Ông Bắc Đế (翁北帝), hence it is also referred to as Bắc Đế Temple (北帝廟, Beidi Miao). Situated in Long Xuyên Ward (An Giang), the temple backs onto the urban quarter and faces the Long Xuyên River. According to its inscription, the temple is approximately 150 years old: initially constructed in a modest form, it was rebuilt in the year Giáp Ngọ (甲午, Jiǎwǔ, 1887) and completed in Mậu Tuất (戊戌, Wùxū, 1891), attaining the elegant architectural character preserved until today (Trần, 1989). This marked the significant role of the Cantonese community in the spiritual and social life of the region. The site preserves valuable artifacts over a century old, including an inscription commemorating the benefactors who contributed to the Assembly Hall's construction, a bronze bell with prominent Hanzi inscriptions, an iron censer (đỉnh sắt), deities' shrines (khám thờ), and notably a sculpture of the "Three Realms" (tam giới 三界, sanjie) rendered in a style characteristic of the Hoa community.



Sculpture of Three Realms

Source: An Giang Museum

The principal layout consists of the main altar dedicated to Bắc Đế Trấn Vũ (北帝鎮武, Beidi Zhenwu), flanked by altars to Quan Công (關公, Guang Gong – Lord Guan) and Thiên Hậu (天后, Tianhou – the Heavenly Empress). Featuring a yin–yang tiled roof (陰陽瓦, yinyang wa), along with gilded horizontal plaques (hoành phi) and parallel couplets (câu đối), the temple has retained its traditional spatial composition despite several restorations (An Giang Museum, 2024).



Bắc Đế Temple in the 1920s

Source: Internet



Bắc Đệ Temple nowadays

Source: Nguyễn Thị Kim Ngân

At present, certain wooden decorative elements exhibit signs of deterioration, the ceramic glaze on the roof has flaked off due to weathering, and the worship statues require more careful conservation to prevent further damage. This underscores the need not only to preserve the material fabric but also to safeguard the spiritual and religious values embodied by the monument.

3.2. Artistic and Heritage Values

3.2.1. Architectural Art

Bắc Đệ Temple exhibits a distinctly Cantonese (廣東, Guangdong) architectural style, expressed through its layout in the shape of the character “Quốc” (國, guo – “state”), the symmetrical spatial arrangement, and the roof structure composed of yin–yang tiles (陰陽瓦, yinyang wa) in red, complemented by turquoise-glazed eaves, and accentuated by yellow-painted walls. The round *Xylia xylocarpa* wooden columns are lacquered in red and inscribed with gilded parallel couplets. The brick walls are bound with lime mortar in the “ô đước” technique, while the floor is paved with floral-patterned tiles. The main entrance is framed with finely carved blue stone, and the central courtyard forms the Thiên Tỉnh (天井, tianjing – “sky well”). This constitutes a representative cultural heritage site, preserving a distinctive architectural-artistic tradition in An Giang Province (An Giang Museum, 2024).



The Thiên Tỉnh (天井, tianjing – “sky well”) in between of the main entrance and the main hall.

Source: Nguyễn Thị Kim Ngân

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3.2.2. *Sculptural and Decorative Art*

The sculptural details of Bắc Đế Temple demonstrate refined craftsmanship in the technique of relief carving, with a well-structured composition that harmonizes forms and motifs. Representations of the dragon (龍, long), phoenix (鳳, feng), and qilin (麒麟, qilin) are rendered through deep carving and high relief, producing a vivid and dynamic effect. This constitutes a distinctive artistic feature of the Hoa community, likewise observable in the temple system of Đồng Nai—where the decorative art of vernacular religious architecture embodies not only aesthetic values but also reflections of humanistic philosophy (Nguyễn, k.n.).

The wooden carvings depicting motifs such as lưỡng long tranh châu (雙龍爭珠, shuanglong zhengzhu – “two dragons contending for a pearl”), the peony (牡丹, mudan), waves (水波, shuibo), and immortals (神仙, shenxian) not only generate a striking visual effect but also convey auspicious meanings. The decorative scheme embodies a distinctively Chinese aesthetic, juxtaposed with compartmentalized ornamental patterns (ô hộc) characteristic of the Nguyễn dynasty on the roof ridge.

With the yin–yang tiled roof (陰陽瓦, yinyang wa) and the ensemble of miniature figurines adorning the ridge, the temple’s dominant colors are red (紅, hong) and yellow (黃, huang)—symbols of prosperity, authority, and auspiciousness—characteristic of the Cantonese architectural style.

3.2.3. *Symbolism in Culture and Belief*

Bắc Đế Temple is dedicated to Bắc Đế Trấn Vũ (北帝鎮武, Beidi Zhenwu), a deity symbolizing strength and protection. This shows a parallel with the cult of Quan Đế (關帝, Guandi) in southern Vietnam, where Quan Vân Trường (關雲長, Guan Yunchang) is likewise regarded as an emblem of loyalty, righteousness, and communal guardianship (Trần, 2021). The figures of Ông Nhật (日翁, Rì Wēng – the Sun deity) and Bà Nguyệt (月婆, Yue Po – the Moon deity) symbolize the harmony of yin and yang (陰陽, yinyang), while the Eight Immortals (八仙, Baxian) represent longevity and auspicious omens. These elements function not merely as religious practice but also as symbols of cohesion for the Hoa (華人, Huaren) community in An Giang, enabling them to consolidate their identity and sustain their traditions (Vĩnh, 2022).

Bắc Đế Temple (北帝廟, Beidi Miao) functions not only as a sanctuary dedicated to Bắc Đế Trấn Vũ (北帝鎮武, Beidi Zhenwu), but also as a communal hub reflecting the integration of the Hoa (華人, Huaren) into the urban life of Long Xuyên. With both tangible and intangible heritage values, the architectural and artistic monument of Ông Bắc Temple was officially recognized and inscribed on the national register by the Ministry of Culture and Information under Decision No. 112/VH-QĐ, dated June 15, 1987 (An Giang Museum, 2024).

3.3. *Comparative analysis*

When compared with the Hoa’s assembly halls (hội quán Hoa, 會館, huiguan) in Hội An, Hồ Chí Minh City, and Đồng Nai, Bắc Đế Temple (北帝廟, Beidi Miao) reveals many shared characteristics: elaborate decorative schemes, the harmonious integration of architecture and sculpture, as well as its socio-communal functions (Võ & Đào, 2015; Trần, 2023; Nguyễn, K.N.). Nevertheless, what distinguishes Bắc Đế Temple is its adaptation to the Southern Vietnamese environment: the use of locally available materials, structural resilience against the region’s heavy rainfall, and religious symbols resonant with the life of riparian communities, such as depictions of fish (魚, yu) and shrimp (蝦, xia).

3.4. *Strategies for Heritage Conservation and Enhancement*

3.4.1. *Conservation of artifacts and monuments*

At present, certain symbolic sculptures, such as the Qilin on the column tops of the temple gate and the statues of the Sun God and Moon Goddess, are no longer extant, while several decorative panels have deteriorated. A restoration plan is required, following the principle of preserving the original state, employing traditional materials and techniques to maintain the authenticity of the monument.

3.4.2. *Community solidarity*

The conservation of monuments is not solely the responsibility of the state but also entails the active participation of the local Hoa community. Traditional festivals, ritual practices, and communal activities should be revitalized and sustained in order to preserve both the tangible and intangible dimensions of the heritage.

3.4.3. *Promoting heritage values in tourism and education*

The Bắc Đế Temple holds the potential to become a significant cultural and tourism destination in An Giang. The integration of sightseeing, religious experience, and historical–cultural education would contribute to the dissemination of heritage values. This model has already proven effectively in Hồ Chí Minh City, where the Hoa’s assembly halls have become distinctive highlights of cultural tourism (Trần, 2023).

4. CONCLUSION

The Bắc Đế Temple in Long Xuyên Ward, An Giang Province, is not only a religious site of the Cantonese Chinese community but also an architectural and sculptural heritage of profound aesthetic and historical value. From an archaeological perspective, the temple can be approached as a ‘living monument,’ where material traces (architecture, sculpture, building materials) converge with intangible dimensions (beliefs, symbols, and communal memory). A comparative analysis with the Hoa’s assembly halls and temples in Hội An, Hồ Chí Minh City, and Đồng Nai reveals shared artistic features, while also highlighting the temple’s distinctive character within the socio-cultural context of Southern Vietnam.

The value of the Bắc Đế Temple lies not only in its refined artistic form but also in its role as a center of community cohesion, preserving cultural identity and embodying the creative adaptation of the Chinese diaspora within a new environment. In the context of globalization and urbanization, the conservation of this monument must be closely linked to community participation, the application of science and technology, and the promotion of its values in education and cultural tourism. This study, therefore, contributes to the body of scholarly literature while offering practical recommendations for a sustainable conservation strategy of the Hoa’s architectural and artistic heritage in An Giang.

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