
Devotion to Ong Bon (Xuan Tian Shang Di) of the Chinese Community in Binh Duong

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ABSTRACT: Xuan Tian Shang Di is a significant deity within Taoist and Vietnamese folk religion, esteemed for his power, valor, and sanctity. This belief system was introduced from China with the migration of Chinese people and has become established in various regions of Vietnam. In Binh Duong, this belief takes on a unique form within the Hokkien Chinese community (Hoa Phuoc Kien). The Hokkien Chinese community, particularly the Wang clan, has specifically identified Ong Bon with Xuan Tian Shang Di. Over time, this belief has become deeply integrated into the spiritual life of the community and has enriched the local cultural landscape. This study aims to examine the process through which Xuan Tian Shang Di was personified as Ong Bon and to elucidate the development of this belief within the Hokkien Wang clan in Binh Duong.

KEYWORDS: Binh Duong, Chinese community, religious beliefs, Ong Bon, Xuan Tian Shang Di

INTRODUCTION

Ong Bon, or Bon Dau Cong (本頭公), and sometimes recorded as Bon Dau Cong Cong (本頭公公), signifies the founding ancestor or leader of the community, endowed with the power and authority to protect both the community and its land. Similar to how the Vietnamese revere the Thanh Hoang Deity and the Khmer have shrines to Neak Ta, Ong Bon is a significant deity venerated by the Chinese community. Many temples dedicated to Ong Bon have been established worldwide, including in Vietnam. When the Chinese migrated to Vietnam, they brought with them cultural practices, including the worship of their deities, which serves their spiritual needs. This belief system is unique to the Chinese community. They have built numerous Ong Bon temples throughout the southern provinces of Vietnam. Ong Bon can be the primary deity of worship or a secondary deity in other temples. Ong Bon is a symbolic title rather than a specific historical figure; the representation of Ong Bon can vary among different Chinese communities, sometimes as a historical figure or as a natural deity. Most Chinese communities identify Ong Bon as either Phuoc Duc Chanh Than (God of Prosperity) or Tho Than (Earth God). For example, the Chinese community in Cho Lon, Ho Chi Minh City, worships Ong Bon as Chau Dat Quan, while the Chaozhou Chinese in Tra Vinh consider Ong Bon to be as Zheng He... (Dang Hoang Lan, 2014). According to the analysis by author Nguyen Xuan Nghia: "The Chinese community views Ong Bon as a deity who protects a specific area of land and its inhabitants, serving as a local earth god. Ong Bon symbolizes wealth, prosperity, happiness, and peace" (Nguyen Xuan Nghia, 1984).

The Ong Bon belief among the Chinese community in Binh Duong has a long history, dating back to the arrival of the Chinese immigrants in the area. This deity is enshrined in many Thien Hau temples throughout the province. Specifically, the Hokkien Chinese community (Hoa Phuoc Kien) in Binh Duong venerates Ong Bon as their ancestral figure and has established numerous temples dedicated to this deity. Among the Hokkien Chinese here, there are two main clans: the Ly clan and the Wang clan. The Ly clan has established the Phuoc An Temple, dedicated to the Seven Lords (That Phu Dai Nhan), who are personified as Ong Bon and are considered the ancestors of the seven clans: Li (力), Zhōu (周), Zhū (朱), Xiāo (蕭), Guō (郭), Zhào (趙), and Lǐ (李). Meanwhile, the Wang clan has founded several temples, including Fu Wu Dian, Fu Yi Tang, Fu Shou Tang, and Yu Xu Gong, which worship Xuan Tian Shang Di, personified as Ong Bon for their clan.

Xuan Tian Shang Di is a significant deity in Taoism, revered by the Chinese. When they migrated to Vietnam, they brought this belief with them and spread it widely, gradually establishing it as a deity also venerated by other local communities. In Vietnam, there are numerous temples dedicated to Xuan Tian Shang Di, built by both Vietnamese and Chinese. Notable Vietnamese temples include Huyen Thien Co Quan in Hanoi and the Quan Thanh Temple in Hanoi. Among the Chinese community, prominent temples include Chua Cau (Bridge Pagoda) in Hoi An and Bac De Temple (Chua Ong Bac) in An Giang... However, in these regions, the Chinese community does not specifically identify Xuan Tian Shang Di as Ong Bon. In Binh Duong, however, the Hokkien Chinese

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community, particularly the Wang clan, regards this deity as Ong Bon—a powerful deity who, in addition to protecting the community, is also considered a deity of wealth and a guardian of the land where they live. For instance, the Ong Bon Pagoda in Xiem Can, located in Vinh Trach Dong Commune, Bac Lieu City, also known as the Xuan Tian Shang Di Ancient Temple or Xuan Tian Shang Di Temple, was established by the Chaozhou Chinese community. Although it is referred to as Ong Bon Pagoda, the principal deity worshipped here is Xuan Tian Shang Di. The Chinese community does not equate this deity with Ong Bon, as there is a separate altar for Ong Bon within the main hall. The term "Ong Bon Pagoda" may simply reflect popular or local naming conventions. Therefore, we believe that Ong Bon in this context refers to a different deity than Xuan Tian Shang Di.

This study is the result of field research conducted by the authors. We focus on examining the representation, process of formation, development, and personification of Xuan Tian Shang Di as Ong Bon, as well as the cultural and religious activities related to Ong Bon within the Hokkien Chinese Wang clan in Binh Duong.

2. Title and Origin of Ong Bon (Xuan Tian Shang Di)

The Hokkien Chinese Wang clan in Binh Duong venerates Xuan Tian Shang Di, one of the major deities revered in Taoism in China, who has been personified as Ong Bon.

Xuan Tian Shang Di, also known by various other names such as Zhen Wu, Xuan Wu, Bei Di Zhen Wu, Xuan Wu Sheng Jun, Zhen Wu Sheng Jun, and Bei Ji You Sheng Zhen Ren... is a deity with a multitude of names due to the rich and diverse legends surrounding him throughout history. Originally a natural deity, he was endowed with different myths by popular belief over time and was elevated to prominence by the Chinese imperial court through official titles. As a result, he has become a majestic and significant deity in Taoism, venerated in many locations. *"In Chinese culture, it is essential to mention the concept of the Supreme Deity (God who governs Heaven), Yama (the god of the underworld), and the Five Directions Deities (five gods who govern the five directions). Initially, the worship of the intertwined snake and turtle (Xuan Wu), representing the North, gradually evolved over various feudal periods into a human-like deity (the Northern Emperor God)"* (Nguyen Ngoc Tho, 2017: 143).

In the Warring States period, the term "Xuanwu" appeared in the poem Yuan You (遠遊) written by Qu Yuan (屈原), but its meaning was not clear at that time. It wasn't until the Han Dynasty that Zhang Hongyi (宏誼先) compiled the meanings of Xuanwu into three categories: (1) the combination of a turtle and a snake; (2) a group of northern stars; (3) the god of water. In the book Tianwen Xun (天文訓), which is part of the Huainanzi (淮南子), the northern direction, the element of water, and Xuanwu are classified together. Therefore, Xuanwu is often compared with Qinglong, Baihu, and Zhuque, and collectively referred to as the Four Symbols. These represent the celestial bodies in the East, West, South, and North of the sky and are all responsible for governing and stabilizing the four directions. Among the artifacts discovered from the Han Dynasty, Xuanwu is depicted as a creature combining a turtle and a snake. From then on, the term "Xuanwu" was used to refer to the northern direction. After the establishment of Daoism, Xuanwu was included as one of the deities in Daoism. However, from the Eastern Han to the Six Dynasties period (2nd to 6th centuries CE), Xuanwu's status among Daoist deities was not high; he was merely an attendant of Daoism. According to early Daoist texts, Xuanwu was originally a creature associated with Laozi. In the latter half of the 6th century, the Northern Zhou Emperor offered sacrifices to deities representing the five directions: East, West, Center, South, and North, with Xuanwu being one of the objects of worship. This marked the official veneration of Xuanwu. In 1018, Emperor Zhenzong of the Song Dynasty (997 - 1022) renamed Xuanwu as "Zhenwu" with the title "Zhen Tian Zhenwu Lingying You Sheng Zhenjun" (鎮天真武靈應佑聖真君), and his worship spread throughout China. By the Yuan Dynasty, Zhenwu was officially honored as Xuan Tian Shang Di. In 1303, Emperor Chengzong of the Yuan Dynasty conferred upon Zhenwu the title "Huyen Thien Yuan Sheng Renwei Shangdi" (玄天元聖仁威上帝), elevating Zhenwu's status from "Zhenjun" to "Tian Di" (Heavenly Emperor). The worship of Xuan Tian Shang Di flourished during the Ming Dynasty. Legend has it that Emperor Taizu of Ming received assistance from Xuan Tian Shang Di during the establishment of the Ming Dynasty and the Jingnan Campaign of Emperor Chengzu. Consequently, the Ming Dynasty revered him as the protector of the nation. During the Qing Dynasty, the court implemented a policy of simplification regarding the worship of Xuan Tian Shang Di, which led to a deeper integration of this belief into popular culture. Xuan Tian Shang Di was associated with various functions such as bringing rain, dispersing clouds, curing illnesses, preventing disasters, and ensuring the birth of sons and daughters, thus addressing the common needs of the people (Hong Vu Tong, 2008).

In the year 1118, during the reign of Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty, a Taoist priest named Lin Lingzuo was invited to conduct a ritual to summon Xuan Tian Shang Di. The ceremony was held at noon when suddenly the sky darkened, and amidst thunder and lightning, a large snake and a giant turtle appeared. The emperor lit incense and bowed in reverence, praying for the deity to manifest in a tangible form. A new flash of lightning appeared, and the turtle and snake vanished, revealing a giant foot in front of the palace gate. The emperor bowed again and prayed for the deity to fully manifest. At that moment, a figure appeared, towering over ten feet tall, with a stern expression and an aura surrounding him. His long hair flowed down his back, and he was barefoot, wearing a long black robe that brushed the ground, with wide sleeves and golden armor over it, complemented by a belt made of jade. He held a sword in his hand. After standing for a while, he vanished. The emperor, being a renowned painter, depicted the figure, and this portrait became the basis for all current representations of the deity (Henri Maspero, 2000: 277).

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In the story "Bac Du Chen Wu," which recounts the journey of Xuan Tian Shang Di, it is said that Zhenwu was originally a part of the Jade Emperor. After descending to the mortal realm for some time, he became tainted by earthly vices. Despite numerous attempts at cultivation and transformation, he could not return to the heavens. The celestial saints, seizing the opportunity while Zhenwu was asleep, removed his tainted stomach and intestines and replaced them with pure reeds and lotus flowers. However, the stomach and intestines of Zhenwu transformed into two malevolent spirits: Gui Jing (the stomach) and Xia Jing (the intestines), which harmed people. Zhenwu subdued these two spirits, who then became his loyal attendants in his quest to eradicate demons and monsters (Huynh Ngoc Trang, 1997). The Hokkien Chinese Wang clan in Binh Duong, following this legend and practical experience, developed the Hau dance¹ which is associated with the worship of Ong Bon. They explain that the Hau represents the transformed Gui and Xia generals, who, after being subdued by Xuan Tian Shang Di, became his supportive generals. (Department of Culture and Information of Binh Duong Province, 1999: 288 - 289).

3. Institution and Practice of the Ong Bon (Xuan Tian Shang Di) Worship Among the Hokkien Chinese in Binh Duong

3.1. Formation Process

The Chinese began to settle in Binh Duong in the late 17th century. These settlers were part of the "anti-Manchu pro-Ming" Chinese group, who were allowed by Lord Nguyen to settle in Cu Lao Pho (now Bien Hoa). They gradually moved to various areas that are now part of Binh Duong, particularly around what is now Thu Dau Mot City, which became an ideal settlement location during the early period of colonization. Binh Duong, with its abundant kaolin resources, soon attracted skilled Hokkien potters who began settling here and developing the pottery industry starting in the 18th century. Pottery work was initially present in the Chom Sao and Lai Thieu areas and later spread to Phu Cuong, Tan Phuoc Khanh (People's Committee of Binh Duong Province, 2010: 164 - 166). Some sources indicate that Phu Cuong was an early attraction for the Chinese, particularly the skilled Hokkien potters. Later, in the late 19th century, the Chinese began to disperse and settle in Lai Thieu, An Thanh, and Tan Phuoc Khanh to take advantage of the local kaolin resources and develop the pottery industry (Binh Duong Historical Science Association, 2012: 32 - 34).

Before the establishment of Phu Cuong market in 1838, there were very few Chinese residents in the area. By the late 19th century, the Chinese community began to grow significantly in Binh Duong. Phu Cuong became the primary settlement area due to its status as the largest market in the Thu Dau Mot region, its favorable transportation links by both waterways and roads, and its local kaolin resources that supported the pottery industry, especially for the Hokkien Chinese. The pottery products and various agricultural and forestry goods were quickly consumed, with shipments going to the Mekong Delta provinces and even to Cambodia (Binh Duong Historical Science Association, 2012: 32-34). In this bustling context, the Chinese, along with other communities, lived together in the new land, allowing Chinese culture to gradually permeate social life. Although the worship of Ong Bon is not as widespread in Binh Duong as the worship of Thien Hau or Quan Cong, it still retains a distinct flavor of the beliefs of this ethnic community. There are significant festivals associated with Ong Bon that have a broad influence, extending to many areas both within and beyond the local region.

The formation of cultural and religious institutions among the Chinese in Binh Duong is reflected through their places of worship. Before the 19th century, there were no Chinese religious establishments in Binh Duong. It was not until the late 19th century, with the increasing influx of Chinese immigrants, that the development and establishment of cultural and religious institutions began. Notable among these is the founding of Thien Hau Temple in Rach Huong Chu Hieu, Phu Cuong in 1867 by the Hokkien and Chaozhou Chinese groups. Additionally, there were two prominent places of worship for Ong Bon: Phuoc An Temple, established in 1882 by the Hokkien Li clan, which worships the Seven Lords, who is deified as Ong Bon; and Phuoc Vo Dian, founded in 1885 by the Hokkien Wang clan, which worships Xuan Tian Shang Di, also deified as Ong Bon (Binh Duong Historical Science Association, 2012).

Later, the Hokkien Wang clan began to settle in other areas such as Lai Thieu, An Thanh, and Tan Phuoc Khanh. In each of these locations, they established places of worship for Ong Bon. Currently, there are four places of worship for Ong Bon (Xuan Tian Shang Di) in Binh Duong Province:

- Fu Wu Dian (1885), also known as Ong Bon Ba Lua Temple, is located at Ly Tu Trong Street, Chanh Nghia Ward, Thu Dau Mot City, Binh Duong Province.
- Fu Shou Tang (which has a long history of establishment and was initially built using simple materials, but was reinforced in 1934) is also known as Ong Bon Chom Sao Temple. It is located on Chom Sao Street, Hung Dinh Ward, Thuan An City, Binh Duong Province.
- Fu Wu Tang (1936), also known as Ong Bon Tan Phuoc Khanh Temple, is located on DT 746 Street, Tan Phuoc Khanh Ward, Tan Uyen Town, Binh Duong Province.

¹ Hau Dance: A distinctive form of dance specific to the Hokkien Chinese community in Binh Duong. Unlike the Lion, Dragon, or Lion dances, the Hẩu dance is a ritual performance featured in festivals of the Hokkien Chinese in Binh Duong, particularly during the Ong Bon festival. The term "Hau" is derived from the word "Hảo" (好 - Hảo meaning good or lucky). Some interpret the name "Hau" as a phonetic variation of "Hổ" (虎 - Tiger).

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- Fu Wu Tang (Yu Xu Gong – 1971), also known as Ong Bon Lai Thieu Temple, is located in Lai Thieu Ward, Thuan An City, Binh Duong Province.

When constructing the Phuoc Vo Dien temple, the Hokkien clan brought over a set of 11 statues from China, which are considered the main statues and include: Xuan Tian Shang Di (2 statues); Nan Chao Da Di; Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin); Hong Hai Er; Immortal Maiden; Nezha (2 statues); Zhang Xianshi; and Jingzhu Zun Wang (2 statues). Later, when building the other temples, the Wang clan created additional sets of statues for worship, which served as supplementary. Furthermore, the temples also integrate the worship of the Wang clan's ancestors, Guan Sheng Di Jun, Guan Ping, Zhou Xiang, Fu De Zheng Shen, Jiu Tian Xuan Nu, and Ren Zhu Zun Wang, among others.... The set of statues in each temple may vary, but Ong Bon (Xuan Tian Shang Ti) has three main forms, while Fu Shou Tang has only two forms, similar to the original set of statues. These forms are distinguished by the color of their faces; each figure has a specific function: Xuan Tian Wu (with a yellow face), Xuan Tian Wen (with a pink face), and the remaining one is Xuan Tian Hu Fa. As for the current situation regarding why some places have three forms and others have two, we have not yet explained this and are still in the research phase.

All statues of Ong Bon in the temples are made of wood and have the same appearance. Each statue is about 30 cm tall, with variations in height distinguished by the base. The statues are depicted sitting majestically on a throne, with one hand holding a sword engraved with the Seven Stars symbol, the other hand in a mudra (hand gesture), one foot stepping on a serpent—Divine Serpent—and the other foot stepping on a tortoise—Divine Tortoise, which are the two subordinates that He has subdued.

It is important to mention the case of the Fu Yi Tang (Ong Bon pagoda Tan Phuoc Khanh), which originally worshipped Guan Sheng Di Jun. Later, when Ong Bon (Xuan Tian Shang Di) was brought in for worship, the influence of this deity overshadowed the original guardian deity, taking over all the activities and festivals there, and gradually becoming the main object of worship (Department of Culture and Information of Binh Duong Province, 1998: 101 - 105).

The history of the formation and development of the Chinese community in Binh Duong Province reflects the process through which the worship of Ong Bon gradually took root and became a part of the local religious life. From the moment this belief system arrived with Chinese immigrants to Binh Duong, it was established in their consciousness that Xuan Tian Shang Di was Ong Bon. Over time, successive generations have continued this tradition. It should be understood that this belief system, through cultural exchange, has influenced the local community groups, leading them to also recognize Ong Bon. Most locals use this term to refer to activities related to the belief, such as Ong Bon festivals, Ong Bon processions, and Ong Bon temples.... Today, as cultural exchanges become more vigorous and society evolves, there have been significant changes in the cultural and religious practices associated with Ong Bon. However, these changes have not diminished the cherished traditions. The worship of Ong Bon, which is deeply rooted in a specific ethnic community, has a strong influence that is increasingly spreading to the local Vietnamese people and neighboring provinces.

3.2. Ong Bon Festival (Xuan Tian Shang Di)

Ong Bon festival (Xuan Tian Shang Di) is held from the 24th to the 27th of the 2nd lunar month, with four worship sites taking turns to organize it every three years. Previously, the festival was only held at Fu Wu Dian, but later other worship sites dedicated to Ong Bon also began to organize the festival.

The purpose of the Ong Bon Festival is to invite the deity to visit the people, exorcise evil spirits, and bestow blessings upon the local residents. Since the festival rotates among four worship sites, each time the festival is hosted at a particular site, the main statue set is brought there for worship. The festival features a procession with the ceremonial palanquin around the residential area and performances of traditional *cải lương* opera at the worship site. During the festival, a stage is set up for *cải lương* performances so that attendees can enjoy the shows. The Ong Bon Festival is deeply rooted in Taoist traditions, with ceremonies presided over by Taoist priests who perform traditional rites for peace and offerings. The festival lasts for 3 days and 4 nights, from the opening to the closing of the ceremonies, with a total of 25 major and minor rituals. Each ritual includes different offerings, ceremonial texts, prayers for blessings, and congratulatory verses.

On the 24th day of the 2nd lunar month, the Board of Trustees will decorate the main hall and begin with the ceremony of the Opening of the Eyes for the Hau teams. This form of performance, associated with the Ong Bon belief, involves many *Hầu* teams from the local Hokkien Chinese community gathering to participate in the parade. Following this is the ceremony of offering to The God of Fortune and Virtue, aimed at invoking this deity's blessings for the prosperity and happiness of the region.

The main ceremony begins at midnight on the 25th day of the 2nd lunar month. It starts with the Grand Ceremony of the Altar (Dai Le Dang Dan), where the ceremonial bells and drums are struck (similar to the opening of the drums for the ritual), followed by the Rite of Legal Presentation. This part is presided over by Taoist priests and aims to invite the deities, immortals, and celestial generals to attend the ceremony. Following this is the Eight Immortals' Worship Ceremony, where performers dressed in costume as the Eight Immortals make their appearance to introduce themselves and request permission to accompany and support the procession. Next is the ceremony of inviting the divine statues, where Taoist priests hand over the statues to the representatives of the Board of

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Trustees, who then place them on the palanquins (Palanquin, 神轎)², There are four palanquins, lavishly decorated with flags, red cloth, and electric lights, with the statues securely fastened inside with fabric. These palanquins represent the four temples, and each time a festival is held at a specific temple, all four palanquins are brought there. The deities carried on the palanquins include Xua Tian Wen (with a white face), Xuan Tian Wu (with a yellow face), Nan Chao Da Di; Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin). Each deity is accompanied by other celestial figures such as Nezha, Hong Hai Er, Immortals Maiden, and Jinzhu Zun Wang. Once all preparations are complete, the procession of Xuan Tian Shang Di begins, lasting until early the next morning. Young men from the community carry the four large palanquins, parading around the residential area along a predetermined route. Leading the procession is the Hau team, which clears the way, followed by Taoist priests chanting. Next come the four Ong Bon palanquins, and finally, the lion, dragon, and unicorn dance troupes. As the procession moves, drums and gongs fill the area, and flags fill the sky. Along the way, the young men carrying the palanquins perform the ritual of "shaking the palanquins" before placing them at the prepared altars of local residents to welcome the divine presence of Xuan Tian Shang Di. The "shaking of the palanquins" is performed similarly to a swinging motion. Four people carry each palanquin, and the shaking is done with significant force. This tradition has been preserved by the local Chinese community from their hometown of Fujian. Throughout the procession, the Board of Trustees will set up various worship points and perform rituals such as the Grand Altar Ceremony, the Offering of Thanks to the Mountain Deity, and the Offering to the Altar. These rituals aim to give thanks to heaven and earth and to pray for the continued protection and blessings of the deities for national peace and the safety of the community's land.



Figure 1: The ritual of shaking the palanquin during the Ong Bon Festival (Xuan Tian Shang Di), performed by young men from the Chinese community.

Photo by the author group, taken on March 16, 2023 in Chanh Nghia Ward, TDM City.

The procession will return to the temple around noon on the 25th day of the 2nd lunar month. The Taoist priests will perform the Rite of Returning the Deities, inviting the deities back to the temple. The Board of Trustees will set up an offering table in front of the temple gate, with vegetarian offerings and four bowls of water containing towels and pomelo leaves. The Board of Trustees will cut the ropes securing the statues, with each person retrieving a statue. Additional gold and silver paper money will be placed under the statues before they are returned to the main hall. From the afternoon of the 25th to the evening of the 26th day of the 2nd lunar month, the Board of Trustees will conduct numerous major and minor rituals at the temple. These rituals are similar to memorial ceremonies, each with its own purpose, such as offerings to various local deities, a military feast and awards ceremony, rituals to dispel calamities, and offerings to the Jade Emperor... However, all these ceremonies share a common purpose: to pray for national peace and the well-being of the people, and to give thanks to the deities who have protected the land where the community resides. At dawn on the 27th day of the 2nd lunar month, the grand ceremony of "Sending Off the Deities to Heaven" takes place, marking the conclusion of the festival.

Throughout the festival, people will come to offer incense along with various offerings. For Ong Bon - Xuan Tian Shang Di, the

² The palanquins (palanquin, 神轎) used in Ong Bon temples here are typically very large and cumbersome, with a rigid design that allows only basic movements such as walking or gentle swaying, similar to a "swing." In contrast, the palanquins (sedan chair, 輦轎) at Phước An Temple, a worship site for Ong Bon (Thất Phủ Đại Nhân) by the Hokkien Li family in Binh Duong, are small, light, and simple. These have a small seat and are carried by two people, allowing for more dynamic movements such as vigorous "shaking" or rotating with considerable force..

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Board of Trustees and the community perform vegetarian offerings, as they believe he is a Buddha who has attained enlightenment. The offerings include fruits, various types of vegetarian noodles, bao buns, and Chinese sticky rice cakes. For offerings to other deities, meat is included, such as chicken, duck, pork intestines, and dried squid.... The Board of Trustees will cover the offerings with mo chai (a type of animal fat with a net-like appearance). The Taoist priests will continue to lead the ceremonies and the procession, wearing red robes. Members of the Board of Trustees with official positions will wear blue long robes in the traditional style and conical hats. Other members of the Board will wear matching traditional-style uniforms, each with a red sash that has "Xuan Tian Shang Di" written on it.

For the Jade Emperor offering ceremony, the Board of Trustees will set up a large altar in the temple courtyard. They will display many offerings of gold and silver paper money shaped like bundles of rice, as well as real rice, salt, chicken, duck, pork intestines, and pig organs covered with mo chai, and sticky rice cakes. Additionally, many tea cups will be arranged in the shape of the letter "V." The ceremony will be presided over by a Taoist priest wearing black robes and a large rope wrapped around his body. He is responsible for reciting the prayers for peace. Another Taoist priest, dressed in blue traditional robes with a red cloth wrapped around his waist and holding a horn, will assist by occasionally blowing the horn. At the end of the ceremony, the Board of Trustees will burn all the paper money offerings.



Figure 2: The Taoist priest and the Yu Xu Gong (Ong Bon Lai Thieu Temple) Administration Committee performing the ritual for Ngọc Hoàng during the Ong Bon festival. Photo taken by the author group on April 4, 2024, in Lai Thieu Ward, Thuan An City.

At Yu Xu Gong (Ong Bon Lai Thieu Temple), there are 08 palanquins, including 04 newly acquired from China. The way the rituals are performed during the festival also differs: the palanquins, both old and new, are placed on a cart. At various ritual sites along the route, young people push the cart in rapid, circular motions. At times, they will also shake the old palanquins according to tradition.

Compared to other places where Ong Bon is worshiped, the belief in Binh Duong has strongly developed its distinctive features, from the Taoist-influenced ritual practices to the organization of the festival. Over time, this belief has had a significant impact on the local community and beyond. Although the Ong Bon festival is not as large in scale as the Thien Hau Temple Festival, it has a unique character that is hard to confuse with other festivals. The Ong Bon festival is more focused on ritual practice, while the Thien Hau Temple Festival is more characterized by its processions.

In the past, some studies and many visitors from other regions mistakenly believed that the Ong Bon festival of the Hokkien Chinese, specifically the Ly and Wang families in Binh Duong, was a festival dedicated to honoring the pottery artisans. In reality, this was just a misunderstanding. The confusion arose due to the social conditions following the liberation of Southern Vietnam in 1975. During that period, the organization of the festival was often handled by pottery kiln owners or by groups of them, as only these kiln owners had the financial means to organize the festival for the community. In fact, the Hokkien Chinese community in Binh Duong believes that the patron deity of pottery artisans is a different god, while Ong Bon is regarded as the deity who protects the community.

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4. The role of the Ong Bon (Xuan Tian Shang Di) belief in the lives of the Hokkien Chinese in Binh Duong

Ong Bon (Xuan Tian Shang Di) belief of the Hokkien Chinese Wang clan is an essential part of the religious system in Binh Duong Province. In the current context, as the world undergoes many changes, understanding and reassessing the identity and value of this tradition is crucial. This forms the basis for preserving and developing this belief system, while also maintaining and promoting the unique cultural values of the Hokkien Chinese community. Religious beliefs play an incredibly important role in the life of a community, especially when they are related to the culture and spirituality of specific ethnic groups or communities. We clearly identify the role of beliefs in social life, which includes: preserving and transmitting cultural values; fostering unity and community; providing spiritual support; shaping behavior and ethics; and promoting individual development.

For the Hokkien Chinese Wang clan, Ong Bon is considered a deity of prosperity and protection, endowed with the power to safeguard and help them achieve stability and success in their lives. Unlike most other Chinese communities that specifically identify Ong Bon as Fu De Zheng Shen (the God of Prosperity and Virtue), the Wang clan's temples dedicated to Ong Bon each have a separate altar for Fu De Zheng Shen. This distinction highlights how the belief system provides comfort, hope, and faith for community members during challenging times, offering a spiritual foundation to help them overcome life's difficulties. According to a local resident (female, approximately 60 years old) living in Lai Thieu, she mentioned that: *“Ong Bon is very powerful. If you face difficulties in life or wish to make a request, you can come here. It is important to truly believe in him; just as when making offerings at a temple, you must do so with sincerity for the deities to witness and grant your wishes”*³. According to a member of the Ong Bon Lai Thieu Temple Administration Committee (male, approximately 60 years old), he further mentioned that: *“Here, Ong Bon is regarded like a Buddha, so he is associated with a vegetarian lifestyle. When you come to make offerings to him, if you receive his blessings, it is not necessary to return with elaborate offerings. As long as you have a good financial situation or not, you can simply light a stick of incense for him. In general, as long as you remember Ong Bon, he will bless you”*⁴.

Local residents here believe that Ong Bon is akin to a deity of wealth is believed to bring good fortune in their work, which is why many businesspeople come to seek his blessings for their enterprises. Additionally, many people have noted that in any year when Ong Bon resides at the festival venue, the local people experience significant progress in their business activities. Based on the results of our interviews during field visits, the majority of local residents and visitors who come here seek wealth and prosperity. They firmly believe that Ong Bon will bless their business endeavors and ensure financial stability. As a result, every year they come to offer their thanks and make offerings. According to a local resident (male, approximately 50 years old) living in Lai Thieu, he mentioned that: *“Every year, when Ong Bon resides in Lai Thieu, the people of Lai Thieu have a very prosperous year in their businesses, and sometimes they even win the lottery”*⁵.

The Ong Bon belief system plays a role in connecting the community: The Ong Bon belief system acts as an invisible thread that connects and strengthens the community. It serves as a foundation of faith and hope, while fostering a spirit of unity that helps maintain stability and sustainable development. The cultural and traditional values are conveyed through rituals and festivals, creating opportunities for people to meet, share, and collectively show respect. A worshipper, a man around 50 years old, stated: *“I am Vietnamese, but I have come to recognize the sacredness of this belief system, so every year I visit here with friends. I find the festival atmosphere lively and festive, even though it takes place in the evening. I believe this is a beautiful tradition that should be preserved, as it helps bring people together”*⁶. *The Ong Bon festival of the Vuong clan, along with the Ba Thien Hau festival and the Ong Bon festival of the Ly clan, has contributed to the vibrant cultural landscape of Binh Duong Province. These festivals play a crucial role in maintaining and strengthening community cohesion.*

The Ong Bon belief plays a crucial role in educating the younger generations of the Hokkien Chinese community. Compared to other places that also worship Xuan Tian Shang Di, such as Hanoi, Hoi An, and Bac Lieu, only Binh Duong hosts a festival with such distinctive ritual practices as previously described. The Ong Bon belief is not only a part of spiritual culture but also serves as an intangible guide, imparting profound ethical values to the younger generation, particularly to the Hokkien Chinese descendants. According to a local resident (male, approximately 65 years old) living in Lai Thieu, he said that: *“The Ong Bon belief serves as a reminder to descendants within the community, whether near or far, to always remember their ancestors and origins. This is a valuable ethical principle that needs to be preserved and promoted”*⁷. These values have driven both personal and collective

³ Excerpt from the interview transcript with a local resident (female, approximately 60 years old), conducted on April 4, 2024, in Lai Thieu Ward, Binh Duong Province.

⁴ Excerpt from the interview transcript with a member of the Administration Committee (male, approximately 60 years old), conducted on April 4, 2024, in Lai Thieu Ward, Binh Duong Province.

⁵ Excerpt from the interview transcript with a local resident (male, approximately 50 years old), conducted on April 3, 2024, in Lai Thieu Ward, Binh Duong Province.

⁶ Excerpt from the interview transcript with a visitor (male, approximately 50 years old), conducted on March 15, 2024, in Thu Dau Mot City, Binh Duong Province.

⁷ Excerpt from the interview transcript with a local resident (male, approximately 65 years old), conducted on April 4, 2024, in Lai Thieu Ward, Binh Duong Province

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development, strengthening unity and the bond within the community.

Today, the Ong Bon (Xuan Tian Shang Di) belief has undergone changes from its traditional form, reflecting some of the practical aspects of modern life. Social dynamics have impacted this belief, leading to both positive and negative transformations. However, the Hokkien Chinese community continues to strive to preserve and promote the valuable aspects of the belief while adapting to contemporary trends to make it increasingly appealing and relevant.

CONCLUSION

Over a historical process enriched with numerous legends and the "official appointment" and "standardization of deities" by the Chinese feudal court, Xuan Tian Shang Di evolved from a natural deity into a highly significant figure in Taoism with widespread influence across China. When the Hokkien Chinese Wang clan settled in Binh Duong, they brought this worship tradition from their homeland, deeply embedding Xuan Tian Shang Di as Ong Bon in their consciousness. Most of the visitors we surveyed, including both Hokkien Chinese and Vietnamese, recognize Xuan Tian Shang Di as Ong Bon, the ancestral deity of the Wang clan. They use this designation to refer collectively to activities related to this belief, such as Ong Bon Temple, Ong Bon Festival, and offerings to Ong Bon. This reflects a deep integration of the belief into their cultural practices, illustrating the enduring significance and adaptability of Ong Bon within the local context...

When the Chinese began to settle in various locations throughout Binh Duong, they established additional temples dedicated to Ong Bon Xuan Tian Shang Di. According to Charles Hirschman: "*The establishment of spiritual institutions for immigrants often provides ethnic communities with a refuge from hostility and discrimination from the broader society, as well as opportunities for economic mobility. These institutions serve as a primary source of economic and social support for those in need and are recognized by the community*" (Charles Hirschman, 2004). Thus, the formation of religious institutions is an essential part of the Hokkien Chinese community's life. These institutions provide spiritual support during the process of building their lives and serve as a manifestation of their historical identity and commitment to developing a local community in their new country.

Later on, the Ong Bon temples recognized the importance of organizing festivals, and as a result, each temple sought to host these events. Consequently, the Ong Bon festival is now held in rotation among the four temples every three years. Over time, the organization of the festival and other activities has remained consistent, attracting increasing numbers of participants. This indicates that Ong Bon is gradually becoming a significant cultural symbol with a strong influence on the spiritual life of the community. Each temple has thus established its strength, becoming a 'center' for communal activities and forming a cohesive spiritual network. This also contributes to the growing diversity and richness of the religious life of the ethnic community in Binh Duong.

Although the Ong Bon festival is not as large in scale as the Thien Hau Temple Festival, our research reveals that this belief system has a unique character closely tied to the communal activities of the Hokkien Chinese community. For them, Ong Bon is regarded as an ancestral figure, a deity of prosperity, a guardian of the local land, and a god of wealth... Most Ong Bon temples in Binh Duong today have been preserved quite well, although there have been some changes in ritual practices and festivals. These adjustments reflect the need to adapt to societal changes, particularly in the context of national industrialization and modernization. The Hokkien Chinese community here has effectively leveraged these changes as opportunities to further develop the belief system, expanding its influence to neighboring areas. Beyond its historical, cultural, and tourism value, the Ong Bon belief, particularly within the Hokkien Chinese community, has played a significant role in fostering community cohesion. At the same time, this belief system significantly contributes to educating young generations about their roots and promoting a compassionate, humane way of life. Preserving and enhancing this belief is not only about maintaining a valuable cultural heritage but also serves as a solid foundation that continues to unite the Hokkien Chinese community in Binh Duong. From the traditional values upheld to this day, the belief system plays a crucial role in fostering unity and sustainable development within the community, both now and in the future.

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