

The Current State of the Thành Hoàng Belief at Tân An Communal House – Vietnam

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents a study on the current state of the Thành Hoàng worship - an inseparable part of Vietnamese spiritual culture - at Tân An communal house, located in Phu An Ward, Ho Chi Minh City. The objective of the research is to gain a deeper understanding of how this belief system is preserved and practiced in the context of a society undergoing significant economic, social, and cultural changes, as well as to identify the challenges and opportunities for its continuity and development. The findings indicate that although the belief of Thành Hoàng remains respected and maintained as an important part of spiritual life, there have been notable changes in its actual practice. The study proposes several solutions and initiatives for preserving and promoting this belief, such as integrating traditional culture into education and community activities - thereby contributing to the safeguarding and enhancement of folk culture in the modern era.

KEYWORDS: Thành Hoàng, Communal House, Vietnam, folk beliefs

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of rapid development and modernization in Vietnam, traditional beliefs and spiritual customs are facing numerous challenges and transformations. One of the most important and longstanding belief systems is the Thành Hoàng worship, which forms an essential part of Vietnam's spiritual culture, particularly within rural village communities. Thành Hoàng is commonly regarded as the guardian deity of a village and is worshipped at communal house, which serve as the center of both communal and spiritual life.

Regarding the origin of Thành Hoàng worship, Phan Ke Binh argued that this practice was introduced into Vietnam during the Tang dynasty (Phan Ke Binh, 2005: 96). The term "Thành Hoàng" refers to a deity who governs a city wall or citadel. According to the Chinese text *Mystical Culture*, Thành Hoàng means city moat (Thành Trì); a moat with water is called "Trì" (pond, lake) and one without water is called "Hoàng". Building earth into "Thành" and digging moats to make "Hoàng" (Nguyen Duy Hinh, 1996: 23). The worship of Thành Hoàng at Tân An communal house, like at many other communal house across the country, has long served as a symbol of communal belief and cultural identity. However, changes in social structure, modern values and lifestyles, along with a decline in the transmission and education of traditional culture to younger generations, have posed serious challenges to the survival and development of this belief system.

With the aim of exploring and analyzing the current state of Thành Hoàng worship at Tân An communal house in Vietnam, this study focuses on assessing the preservation of traditional values in religious practices, the attitudes and participation of the local community, as well as the impact of social, cultural, and economic factors on the continuity of this belief system. The research seeks to provide a comprehensive view of how Thành Hoàng worship is maintained and adapted in the modern era, while also offering recommendations to ensure the sustainability of this tradition in the future.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods, including interviews, surveys, and document analysis. Through this, the research provides in-depth insights into the history and culture of Tân An communal house, as well as the practice of Thành Hoàng worship and the community's attitudes and participation in this belief system in the present context. Specifically:

- In-depth interviews: Conducted with village elders, cultural researchers, and local residents.
- Surveys: Data collected from the community to gain a clearer understanding of attitudes and behaviors related to the belief system.
- Document analysis: Examination of historical records, cultural materials, and spiritual texts related to the communal house and Thành Hoàng worship.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1. History of Tân An communal house

Tân An communal house was built in 1820 by the residents of four villages: Tuong Binh (Tương Bình Hiệp), Tuong An (Tan An), Tuong Hoa (Dinh Hoa), and Cau Dinh. Initially, it was a simple thatched structure known as Tuong An Temple, dedicated to the tutelary deity Thành Hoàng Bồn Cảnh (tutelary deity). About 30 years later, it was reconstructed on a larger scale and gradually took on its current architectural form.

The communal house honors Duke Nguyen Van Thanh (1757–1817), a military official of the Nguyen Dynasty. In 1802, he was appointed Governor of the Northern Citadel (Thang Long), where he oversaw the renovation of the Temple of Literature and the construction of the Khue Van Pavilion. He also contributed to drafting the Hoang Viet Luat Le (also known as the Gia Long Code), a significant legal document of the Nguyen court.

In recognition of his contributions, on January 21st, 1869 (the 21st year of the Tu Duc reign), Emperor Tu Duc issued a royal decree of conferment to Tân An communal house, officially recognizing the temple and conferring the title upon the Thành Hoàng, so that the local people could worship him. According to this royal investiture decree, the principal deity worshipped at the communal house is Thành Hoàng Bồn Cảnh.

Over more than two centuries of existence, Tân An communal house has served not only as a repository of the historical and cultural imprints of the former Tân An region but also as a spiritual symbol, an architectural artwork, and a source of pride for local residents in modern life. The communal house was recognized as a national architectural and artistic monument under Decision No. 1261/QĐ-BVHTTDL dated April 26, 2014. Today, Tân An communal house still retains its solemn and ancient appearance, serving as a vivid testament to the historical flow, especially during the formative period of Southern Vietnam (Dau Ngoc Hai, 2016).

Currently, Tân An communal house is located in Tan An Ward, Thu Dau Mot City, Binh Duong Province, and as of July 2025, it will be part of Phu An Ward, Ho Chi Minh City. The communal house stands in a spacious and tranquil setting amidst a developing residential area. Despite the urbanization that has altered the surrounding landscape, the communal house has preserved its traditional architecture, featuring yin-yang tiled roofs, ironwood frameworks, and exquisitely carved decorative motifs depicting the “Four Sacred Beasts” and “Four Seasons”. Ancient parallel sentences and horizontal plaques are also remarkably well-preserved.

Tân An communal house continues to host the annual Kỳ Yên Festival on the 15th day of the 11th lunar month, attracting a large number of local residents and visitors from afar. The festival is an occasion for the community to commemorate the merits of Duke Nguyen Van Thanh and the pioneer ancestors who contributed to the founding and development of the settlement. It is also a time to pray for national peace, public well-being, and favorable harvests. Ritual activities such as offerings to the deity, the procession of the royal investiture decree, Hát Bội (a form of Vietnamese theatre), lion and dragon dances are solemnly maintained, reflecting the richness of traditional Vietnamese folk culture.

Beyond its spiritual and festive values, Tân An communal house also serves as a “living museum” that vividly reflects the history of settlement, cultural exchange, and transformations in social organization in the Southern region of Vietnam from the 19th century to the present. The preservation and promotion of the site's values are not only the responsibility of local authorities and cultural agencies, but also a heartfelt aspiration shared by generations of residents in the area.

In the context of integration and development, Tân An communal house continues to be a unique cultural space - where modern individuals reconnect with their roots, uphold the moral tradition of “when drinking water, remember its source” and foster the spirit of community solidarity - an enduring value at the heart of the dynamic urban landscape of Phu An Ward, Ho Chi Minh City.

3.2. Altar Arrangement

Based on the field survey at Tân An communal house, the Thành Hoàng is worshipped in a traditional three-compartment structure. The altar of the Thành Hoàng is placed in the central compartment of the communal house. The altar is spacious enough to accommodate the deity's throne at the rear, along with an incense burner, two ceremonial lamps, flower vases, and various offering items.

In front of the main altar stands a large incense burner, where worshippers light and place incense sticks during rituals. A mat is laid out in the space before the incense burner, serving as the designated area for devotees to kneel, make offerings, and pray during festivals or on ordinary days of worship.

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The area where the Thành Hoàng altar is placed is known as the Rear Hall. The altars of Tả Ban, Tây Hiến and Tiền Hiến are located in the left compartment, while the altars of Hữu Ban¹, Đông Hiến² and Hậu Hiến³ are placed in the right compartment relative to the Thành Hoàng altar.

The Main Hall contains a series of interconnected offering tables used for presenting ritual offerings during ceremonial events. These include tables dedicated to Tiên Sư⁴, a statue of President Ho Chi Minh, Thành Hoàng Bồn Cảnh and statues of other Thành Hoàng deities. All of these are placed along the central axis of the communal house, following the sequence seen from the front chamber looking inward.

To the left of the front chamber, there is a row of five offering tables for Female Devotees, and on the right side, five offering tables for Male Devotees. In front of the deity's throne, two weapon racks are positioned on either side, each holding five traditional weapons: a mace, halberd, spear, saber and sword.

Son Nam stated: "If the deity is a military official, two ceremonial horses are displayed on either side, equipped with small wheels on their hooves to allow movement during the royal investiture decree procession and numerous parasols are used to evoke solemnity." (Son Nam, 2018).

3.3. Rituals of Thanh Hoang Worship at Tân An communal house

Based on a survey of annual rituals at Tân An communal house, the most important ceremony is the Kỳ Yên Festival (Kỳ Yên or Peace-Praying Ceremony), held every year on the 15th day of the 11th lunar month. In addition, on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month of each lunar month, offerings of fruit are made. During Lunar New Year's Eve, a special ceremony is also held, and the communal house opens its doors for the public to pay respects.

Every three years, a Grand Kỳ Yên Festival is held, with full-scale rituals performed in the years of the Rat, Horse, Cat, and Rooster. This grand festival takes place over three days - from the 14th to 16th of the 11th lunar month and includes the following ceremonies:

- On the 14th day of the 11th lunar month, the following rites are performed: Thỉnh sắc (The Royal Decree Procession Ceremony); Lễ An vị (Rite of enthronement); Thỉnh sanh (Invitation of sacrificial animals); Túc Yết (Night Offering Ceremony); Xây châu (Initiating ritual performance, Drum Offering Ceremony); Đại bội (Main ritual play). In addition, there are also performing troupes showcasing hát xướng⁵, lion dances...
- On the 15th day of the 11th lunar month, the following activities take place: Hát Bội, Tế Hậu bối (Rite for ancestors); Tế chiến sĩ (fallen soldiers), Đền Cờ;
- On the 16th day of the 11th lunar month, the events include: Hát Bội, Tôn Vương, Đưa sắc (Procession to return the royal decree) and closing of the grand festival

A few weeks prior to the festival, the Ritual Committee (Ban Quý tế) convenes to assign specific responsibilities. They then proceed to send out invitations, clean and repair local roads, houses, and especially renovate the main sanctuary, clean altars, and shrines within the communal house. By the 13th day of the 11th lunar month, the Ritual Committee gathers at the đình to finalize preparations for the festival: hanging banners, setting up lighting, arranging tables and chairs, purchasing food, cooking, and decorating the altars. All preparatory work must be completed by the evening of the 13th, ensuring that the Kỳ Yên Festival can commence smoothly and auspiciously on the morning of the 14th day of the 11th lunar month.

- Lễ Thỉnh sắc (The Royal Decree Procession Ceremony)

¹ Tả Ban (The left altar – from the perspective of looking outward from the altar): This is the place where ancestral tablets or statues of civil deities are placed—those associated with literature, education, rituals, administration, and cultural contributions. Hữu Ban (The Right Altar - from the perspective of looking outward from the altar): This area is reserved for ancestral tablets or statues of martial deities—those who made contributions in military defense, protecting the village, fighting invaders, and warding off evil spirits.

² In the ritual practices at communal houses, "Tây Hiến" (Western Offering) and "Đông Hiến" (Eastern Offering) refer to two altars or offering positions. Tây Hiến is typically dedicated to those who contributed to land reclamation and village founding, while Đông Hiến honors those who protected and preserved the village. Both altars hold significant roles in worship ceremonies, especially during the Kỳ Yên Festival.

³ "Tiền Hiến" and "Hậu Hiến" are traditional cultural concepts in Vietnamese society, referring to those who made significant contributions to the establishment and development of villages. "Tiền Hiến" (Forebears or Founding Ancestors) were the pioneers—those who first reclaimed wild land and founded the original settlements. "Hậu Hiến" (Later Contributors or Successors) were those who came afterward, continuing to develop, expand, and preserve the achievements laid down by the Tiền Hiến.

⁴ In the communal house, the worship of Tiên Sư usually takes place in the central chamber—the most solemn and sacred space. Tiên Sư refers to those who were instrumental in founding or transmitting traditional crafts, or respected teachers who made significant contributions to the village.

⁵ "Biểu diễn hát xướng" (hát xướng performance) is a form of artistic presentation that combines singing with other elements such as acting, dancing, or ritual practices, depending on the specific tradition. The term refers to the use of the human voice to express an artistic work - whether as solo singing, duet, or multi-part choral performance - often accompanied by traditional folk instruments.

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At Tân An communal house, the Royal Decree Procession Ceremony takes place at 6:00 a.m. on the 14th day of the 11th lunar month. This is the ritual of escorting the royal investiture decree of the Thành Hoàng from its place of safekeeping to the altar at the communal house, where the Kỳ Yên Festival is held. The ceremony begins early in the morning with a solemn procession that includes gongs, drums, flags, parasols, a palanquin carrying the long đình (a wooden box), accompanied by a ceremonial music troupe and a lion dance team. The royal investiture decree is usually kept in a secure home of a highly respected village dignitary. The royal decree of Tân An communal house was granted by Emperor Tự Đức on November 19, 1868 (the 21st year of his reign). On ordinary days, the royal investiture decree is kept at the ancestral house of Mr. Nguyễn Tri Quan, a descendant of the Tiên Hiền. During the Kỳ Yên Festival, the Worship Committee holds a ceremony to invite the royal investiture decree back to the communal house for enshrinement, so that the Deity may witness the rituals and bless and protect the local people. Upon arrival, a designated person performs the invocation, then places the royal investiture decree into the long đình for the procession. Along the way, traditional ceremonial music is played continuously. The procession does not head straight to the communal house but instead detours through the Bến Thố market area, following a route of approximately 1 kilometer before returning.

The procession of the royal investiture decree around the residential area symbolizes the Deity witnessing the lives of the people and bestowing blessings upon the local community. Wherever the procession goes, it brings with it an atmosphere of festivity and excitement, attracting more and more participants along the way. Upon returning to the communal house, the procession halts to reorganize its formation. After three rounds of mxyu, drums, gongs, and with all ceremonial lanterns lit, the royal investiture decree is solemnly brought into the main hall. In front of the Deity's altar, the Chief Ritual Master (Chánh tế) hands the box containing the royal investiture decree and the sacred sword to the altar attendants, who place them on the altar. Then, each member of the Worship Committee takes turns offering incense, marking the conclusion of the Royal Decree Procession Ceremony

- Lễ An vị (The Ritual of Installing the Deity at the Sacred Altar)

This ritual signifies the invitation for the Deity to take His sacred seat within the communal house, to witness the festival and to bestow blessings and protection upon the villagers. From this moment on, all activities of the Kỳ Yên festival are carried out under the watchful presence of the Thành Hoàng deity. The atmosphere within the đình becomes sacred and solemn. No one dares to act disrespectfully, for fear of incurring the Deity's displeasure or punishment.

In the past, Lễ An vị was usually held at 9:00 a.m. After the royal investiture decree was brought back to the communal house, participants would temporarily disperse to attend to their own tasks. The Ritual Committee would then gather everyone again to conduct the ceremony. However, over the past decade, this ritual has been conducted earlier, typically around 7:30 to 8:00 a.m. Once the royal investiture decree has been respectfully placed on the altar, there is a short break of about 10-15 minutes before everyone reconvenes at the main hall to begin Lễ An vị. This adjustment in timing is both practical - allowing more convenience for the members of the Ritual Committee and spiritual, expressing the community's desire for the Deity to be promptly installed so He may witness the offerings and devotions of His people throughout the festival.

The offerings for this ceremony include a whole pig that has been dehaired, gutted, and cleaned, with its internal organs also cleaned and placed in front of the Thành Hoàng altar. At the altars dedicated to the Tiên Hiền, Hậu Hiền, Tả Ban and Hữu Ban, each is offered a piece of pork cheek (a cut that includes both lean meat and fat). Other altars receive either a piece of pork rib or a cut of pork meat. This ritual is performed in front of the altar dedicated to the Thành Hoàng altar. Eight Học trò lễ (ceremonial attendants) form two rows on either side, each holding a candle and attentively observing the Chief Ritual Master and Assistant Ritualist (Bồi tế) as they carry out the rites. The ritual progresses step by step according to the cues given by the ceremonial caller (xướng quan). After offering one offering of incense, three offerings of wine, and one offering of tea, the Chấp sự viên (ritual attendants) strikes the drum three times, marking the end of Lễ An vị.

- The Ritual of Inviting the Ancestral Founder of Hát Bội

According to folk belief, Hát Bội troupes must first obtain permission from the Thành Hoàng before they are allowed to perform in the communal house. Otherwise, they may face spiritual consequences. Therefore, on the first morning of the Grand Kỳ Yên Festival, a ritual is held to invite the Ancestral Founder of the Hát Bội into the communal house. Although this ritual is not officially listed in the program, both the Ritual Committee and the Hát Bội troupe conduct it with solemnity and respect.

On the day of the Grand Kỳ Yên Festival at Tân An communal house, the Hát Bội troupe arrives at the communal house quite early, around 9:00 to 10:00 a.m. Upon reaching the courtyard, the troupe stops and sets up the ancestral altar (which they bring along), with the altar facing the main sanctuary. The Chánh Bái (lead ritualist) ⁶ carries a tray of offerings - including betel leaves, liquor, incense, candles, and ceremonial money - to the altar. The Ritual Committee then carries the Hát Bội ancestral altar into the communal house. Once the altar has been properly settled behind the stage, the troupe begins bringing in all the stage props and

⁶ In the context of the village communal house, "Chánh bái" (also known as Chánh niệm hương) is a title within the Ban Quý tế (Ritual Committee). This person plays a central role in conducting worship rituals, especially those dedicated to deities and ancestral spirits.

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equipment to decorate the stage and prepare for the first performance scheduled for the evening of the first day of the Grand Kỳ Yên Festival.

- Lễ Thỉnh sanh (Invitation of sacrificial animals)

After the ritual of inviting the Hát Bội ancestral spirit, the Ritual Committee turns to welcoming guests who come to make offerings at the communal house. At around 2:00 p.m., the committee gathers in the main sanctuary to perform the Lễ Thỉnh sanh. This is the ceremony in which the sacrificial animals are formally presented to the Thành Hoàng deity, seeking divine permission to slaughter them for the Lễ Túc Yết offering.

The sacrificial animal is a live pig with all four legs tightly bound, placed on a wooden bench in front of the Council Altar (bàn thờ Hội đồng). The Chief Ritualist (Chánh tế) performs a symbolic act of slaughter, holding a knife and pointing its tip at the pig's throat. After this gesture, the pig is taken outside for actual slaughter.

In the past, at Tân An communal house, the pig was slaughtered on-site immediately after the Lễ Thỉnh sanh. The Tể giả⁷ would lead the pig to a large tree within the temple grounds, placing it on an elevated wooden board with a basin of salted water below to collect the blood.

According to local belief, if the first stab caused blood to flow abundantly, it was seen as a sign that the village would enjoy good fortune that year. If multiple stabs were required for the blood to flow, it indicated that the year's blessings might be diminished.

As the blood flowed, the Tể giả would collect three small cups of blood and add a pinch of the pig's bristles. These cups were then covered with red paper or gold-and-silver votive paper and placed on the Thành Hoàng altar to be used in the mao huyết blood-offering rite during the Lễ Túc Yết.

In recent decades, following state sanitation and disease-prevention regulations, as well as in an effort to avoid live animal slaughter within sacred grounds, Tân An communal house no longer slaughters pigs on-site. Instead, the pig is brought either to an official slaughterhouse or to the Tể giả's residence for processing.

After the pig is slaughtered (cleaned and shaved, but not yet cooked), a bowl of blood containing some pig bristles - called mao huyết - is prepared. An offering tray is arranged with sticky rice, rice vermicelli, fruits, betel leaves and areca nuts, a plate of salt, rice grains, fermented fish sauce (mắm nêm), regular fish sauce, and fresh herbs, all laid out on the altar. The white pig is then cut into several sections and placed on multiple plates to be offered at different altars. At the Thành Hoàng altar in particular, the offering tray retains the pig's head, four legs, tail, and internal organs intact. After the Lễ Thỉnh sanh concludes, the pig is boiled and brought back to the communal house to be used in the Lễ Túc Yết.



Figure 1: Offerings in the Thỉnh Sanh Ceremony.

Photo taken by the author on December 26, 2023, in Phu An Ward, Ho Chi Minh City.

- Lễ Túc Yết (Night Offering Ceremony, a night ritual of offering and reporting to the tutelary deity prior to the main Kỳ Yên festival)

The Lễ Túc Yết at Tân An communal house is held at 7:00 p.m. on the 14th day of the 11th lunar month. This ritual is carried out in a structured sequence under the guidance of the ceremonial caller. It begins with the mao huyết offering, followed by one round

⁷ “Tể giả” is the person in charge of slaughtering the pig during the ritual offerings at the village communal house

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of incense, three rounds of wine, and one round of tea. The ritual text (chúc văn) is read after the second wine offering. During the proceedings, ceremonial attendants either stand or move around in procession, chanting hymns in praise of the deity. According to scholar Son Nam: “This ritual can be likened to the Tiên Thường ceremony (Ancestor Remembrance Ritual), which precedes the main ancestral death anniversary. In smaller or less affluent communal house, the Lễ Túc Yết may be omitted to reduce costs” (Son Nam, 1994:164).

The offerings in the Lễ Túc Yết include a pig that was ritually dedicated to the deity during the Lễ Thịnh sanh. After being slaughtered, the pig is brought into the main hall and placed on a table with its head facing the altar. The internal organs are placed in a separate basin, and a knife is stuck upright into the pig’s back - a symbolic gesture. Small bowls containing mao huyết are placed on the main altar along with candles, incense, tea, and fruits, which had been prepared beforehand. In addition, each of the other altars within the communal house receives a separate offering - usually a piece of raw pork or pork ribs. For the altars of Tả Ban, Hữu Ban, Tiền Hiền, Hậu Hiền and Thần Nông (Shennong), the offering is always a piece of pork cheek, which contains both lean meat and fat.



Figure 2: Offerings in the Túc Yết Ceremony Presented to the Thành Hoàng.
Photo taken by the author on December 26, 2023, in Phu An Ward, Ho Chi Minh City.

After the Lễ Túc Yết concludes, the pig is taken to the kitchen area, where it is butchered into smaller portions and cooked. These prepared offerings will then be used in the subsequent ritual.

- Lễ Xây châu (Initiating ritual performance, Drum Offering Ceremony)

According to Son Nam: “Prosperous agriculture was the fundamental condition for the king to firmly maintain his throne. It ensured that the people would not fall into vice, commit theft, be incited by others, or indulge in superstition. For agriculture to thrive, weather played a crucial role — favorable rain and wind would lead to abundant harvests and peaceful lives for the people. In ancient beliefs, to stabilize the weather and maintain social order, one had to follow the natural laws of Heaven and Earth, guided by the I Ching (Kinh Dịch), with its principles of Yin and Yang (Âm - Dương), the Eight Trigrams (Bát Quái), and the Five Elements (Ngũ Hành)” (Son Nam, 1994:185).

The Xây châu is a ceremonial act using the sound of drums to stir Heaven and Earth, renew the cosmos, and harmonize the yin and yang forces — seeking balance among Heaven (Thiên), Earth (Địa), and Humanity (Nhân): fulfilling the Way of Heaven (round), the Way of Earth (square), and illuminating the Way of Man. Due to its great significance, the ritual must be performed meticulously, from the decoration and orientation of the drum to the selection of the ritual performer. The drum is painted red, with a yin-yang symbol drawn on its head (Son Nam, 2018: 78).

Before the Xây châu begins, the Chấp sự viên must place the drum facing the most auspicious direction of the year - usually East - believed to bring the greatest fortune. A red cloth is then used to cover the drumhead, symbolically concealing the Thái Cực (the primordial state), representing a universe still in chaos, before the emergence of yin and yang. According to folk beliefs, the person who performs the Xây châu ritual is usually a respected elder in the village - someone knowledgeable, virtuous, living an exemplary life, and blessed with many descendants.

The Xây châu ritual at Tân An communal house belongs to the category of Xây châu văn (literary-style drum invocation). It is basically divided into two parts: Thịnh châu and Xây châu. The Thịnh châu rite is conducted in front of the incense altar, the Chấp sự viên offer one round of incense and one round of wine, while loudly reciting the invocation. After the ceremonial caller proclaims “Chấp sự viên nhập tịch” (The ritual attendant is officially admitted into the rite), the ritual attendant receives the drumstick and proceeds to the front hall to begin the Xây Châu.

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The Cháp sự viên approaches the ceremonial drum, removes the red cloth covering its surface, wipes the drumhead clean, folds the cloth, and wraps it around the drumstick. Then, using the drumstick, he draws the “Four Verticals, Five Horizontals” talisman (Four vertical and five horizontal lines symbolizing the creation of Heaven and Earth.) on the drumhead, the most important talisman in the Xây Châu ceremony symbolizes dương energy (the number nine) (Huynh Ngoc Trang, Truong Ngoc Tuong, 1999: 211). He then steps back three paces and writes the characters “sát quỷ” (kill demons) on the ground, before stepping forward and stamping on them to subdue evil spirits.

After striking the final three drumbeats, the Cháp sự viên hands the drumstick over to the Người cầm chầu (drum master - the person responsible for playing the drum throughout the entire festival season, while the Cháp sự viên only performs the ceremonial opening). He then proceeds to the altar, bows three times, and concludes the Xây Châu ritual. The Người cầm chầu continues with three drumbeats, signaling the Hát Bội troupe to begin the Đại Bội. Hence the folk saying: “The end of Xây Châu marks the beginning of Đại Bội”.

According to N.T.P., among all the ritual days, those who perform the Xây Châu are considered the most important figures of the entire festival season. The drumming ritual of Xây Châu takes place at night to stir the festive atmosphere and serves as a signal to the villagers that the celebratory part of the Kỳ Yên Festival is about to begin. The Người cầm chầu offers incense in prayer to the deities and pays homage to the ancestral spirits of the Hát Bội tradition, bowing or prostrating before the incense altar with the drumstick in hand. Meanwhile, in the front chamber, all performers of the Hát Bội troupe have completed their makeup and are ready for performance. As the music begins to play, the performers step onto the stage to commence the Đại Bội ritual - a ceremonial performance consisting of seven segments, dramatizing the mythical formation of Heaven and Earth in theatrical form. The sequence of rituals includes: Khai thiên tịch địa, Xang nhật nguyệt, Tam tài, Tứ thiên vương, Đứng cái, Gia quan tấn tước, and Bát tiên chúc thọ⁸. Throughout these segments, the performers respectfully offer praises and prayers, seeking divine assistance and blessings. They solemnly invite the deities to witness and enjoy the performances they present.

[Personal interview, N.T.P., male, 65 years old, Member of the Ritual Committee, Phu An Ward, Ho Chi Minh City, December 27, 2024]

• Day Two and Day Three

At Tân An communal house, the second and third days of the Kỳ Yên Festival feature an interweaving of ritual (“lễ”) and festivity (“hội”).

On the 15th day of the 11th lunar month, at 8:00 a.m, the Ho Chi Minh City performing arts troupe stages the play Ngọc Huỳnh Lân xuất thế (Ngoc Ky Lan appeared). At 9:00 a.m, the ritual of offering to the Tể Hậu bối (Rite for ancestors); Tể chiến sĩ (fallen soldiers). In the evening, Lễ tế Đàn cả. At 8:00 p.m, the play Phàn Lê Huê Phá Hồng Thủy Trận (Fan Lihua Destroys the Flood Battle Formation) is performed.

⁸ Khai thiên tịch địa (Opening Heaven and Settling Earth): An actor portraying Pangu (Bàn Cổ) appears on stage holding a bundle of incense, performing ritual movements. This symbolizes the opening of the heavens and the formation of the earth—a representation of the beginning of the universe and the creation of all things.

Xang nhật nguyệt (Moving Sun and Moon): Two performers—one male and one female—represent the Sun and the Moon. They move back and forth across the stage, symbolizing illumination, clarity, and the eternal passage of time.

Tam Tài (The Three Stars): Commonly known in folklore as Tam Đa, Tam Tinh, or Tam Hiền, these figures represent three celestial stars sent by the Heavenly Court to bestow blessings, prosperity, and longevity upon the people.

Tứ Thiên Vương (The Four Heavenly Kings): These are four martial generals guarding the four gates of heaven—East, West, South, and North. Their ritual dance symbolizes the cosmic movement that gives rise to the Eight Trigrams. At the end of the performance, the four deities gather, facing in four directions to offer ceremonial scrolls (liễn) with auspicious blessings.

Đứng cái (The Central Axis): This ritual symbolizes the Five Elements (Ngũ Hành): Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth. Among them, Earth (Thổ) stands at the center as the “cái” (the main/central force), harmonizing the other four elements and balancing the four seasons—Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter—considered its “children”. The act conveys wishes for favorable weather, abundant harvests, and the flourishing of plants and life.

Bát Tiên Hiên Thọ (The Eight Immortals Offering Longevity): Eight immortals perform ritual dances to offer blessings of longevity to the villagers.

Gia Quan Tấn Tước (Bestowing Ranks and Titles): An actor portraying Ông Địa (the Earth God) performs a comic dance. Through humor and joyful gestures, he presents a ceremonial scroll (liễn) conveying the wish for career advancement and official promotion—a blessing for success in one’s profession and rising social status.

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On the 16th day of the 11th lunar month, at 9:00 a.m, the troupe performs San Hậu (Behind the Mountain), followed by Tôn Vương⁹ and Đưa sắc (Procession to return the royal decree) at 1:00 p.m.

- In the ceremonial section, there is the Tiên Sư – Hậu Bồi Offering Ceremony

This ritual honors the forebears who made significant contributions in transmitting traditional crafts to later generations. The altar in this area is beautifully arranged, with vegetarian offerings placed on the upper tier and meat offerings on the lower tier. The ritual team consists of the Trưởng Ban Quý tế, the Chánh bái, followed by the Bồi tế, who performs rites under the direction of the Chánh bái, and the Học trò lễ. During the ceremony, all participants wear traditional attire and carry out prescribed worship gestures. Throughout the proceedings, acts of prostration, incense offering, wine offering, and tea offering are performed, accompanied by continuous ceremonial music played by the ritual orchestra.

- Lễ tạ Hậu Bồi – Chiến sĩ

Lễ tạ Hậu Bồi – Chiến Sĩ is held to honor local heroes and martyrs. Offerings include incense, candles, flowers, fruits, and a tray of dishes resembling an everyday family meal. During the ritual, the music is performed in the Điều Ai style - a mournful melody - serving as a tribute to those who have passed away.

- Lễ Đàn Cà

The most significant and important ritual of the Kỳ Yên festival is the Đàn Cà ceremony (also called Đại Đàn: “Đàn” refers to the place where the ritual is performed, while “Đại Đàn” denotes a grand ritual held to give thanks to the Thành Hoàng). The traditional choice of the Tý hour (midnight to 1:00 a.m.) to begin the ritual is rooted in the cosmological principles of the I Ching: this is the time when “yin wanes and yang rises,” symbolizing the emergence of all auspicious things. The Đàn Cà ritual is essentially similar to the Túc Yết ceremony, with the only change being the alteration of the ritual chant from “nghinh Thần cúc cung bái” (respectfully bow to welcome the deity) to “tạ Thần cúc cung bái” (respectfully bow to thank the deity). In addition, it includes the ẩm phúc, thọ tự (drinking the blessings and receiving the fortune), in which the Ban Quý tế represents the villagers in partaking of the deity’s offerings. After the Đàn Cà ceremony, the Hát Bội troupe performs another play, marking the conclusion of the second day of the Kỳ Yên festival.

At 7:00 p.m. on the second day of the Lễ Kỳ Yên, the ritual is conducted under the guidance of the lễ sinh (ritual prompter). First, the Chánh tế and Bồi tế approach the ritual table to inspect the offerings, which include a plate of fresh blood and pork intestines. After raising the offerings, they carry them outside for burial. Next, the Chập sự viên (drum, gong, and muyu) performers move to their ritual positions. The lễ sinh then guides them to a basin of water to symbolically wash their faces and adjust their attire. Upon completion, they return to their original positions in the main hall and kneel before the Thành Hoàng altar.

The Chập sự viên chập kích (ritual assistant in charge of percussion) receives the drumstick and makes a respectful bow. Upon the command Khởi cổ lệnh (initiation order), he strikes three drum rolls, symbolizing the announcement that the Deity is on the way and about to enter the communal house.

Next is Khai thái bình thanh (opening the sound of peace): three beats on the muyu, struck at a slow tempo, producing a joyful sound that evokes the peaceful atmosphere of the countryside. This is followed by Khởi minh chính: three beats on the gong; Khởi đại cổ: three beats on the drum. Then comes Chinh cổ tề thanh: the gong and drum are struck three times in sequence, with the gong sounding first, followed by the drum.

At this point, the ceremonial orchestra takes their seats and begins playing the ritual drum, while the musicians perform an ensemble piece entitled Nghinh Thiên Tiếp Giá (Welcoming the Deity and Receiving the Honor Guard). The piece evokes the imagined scene of the Deity seated on the altar, acting on behalf of the king to receive the villagers’ petitions.

*Incense Offering Ritual

The Niệm hương viên (incense offering officiant) takes position and performs the quán tẩy ritual (a symbolic hand-washing act of purification before the main rites). He then kneels before the Thành Hoàng altar, lights three sticks of incense, and respectfully raises them to his forehead while reciting a prayer: giving thanks to Heaven, Earth, and the Deities; wishing the leader of the nation good health; and pledging to maintain the incense offerings in the communal house.

Afterward, the incense offering officiant hands the three incense sticks to the lễ sinh, who places them on the altar, then performs deep bow with clasped hands, bows, and withdraws to make way for the Chánh tế, Bồi tế, Đông Hiến and Tây Hiến to approach the altar and perform the ritual bows (four times). Next, the lễ sinh brings a tray of wine, pours it into cups, and respectfully raises a cup to his forehead in time with the ceremonial drumbeats before placing it on the altar (offering three rounds of wine). This is

⁹ “Lễ Tôn Vương” in the context of Southern Vietnamese village festivals, especially during the Kỳ Yên Festival, is a closing ritual that concludes the Hát Bội performance following the Lễ tế Đàn Cà or the primary offering to the village deity. Traditional Hát Bội troupes are invited to perform plays that praise the virtues of the Thành Hoàng, celebrate the beauty of life, and express villagers’ hopes for a prosperous and harmonious future.

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followed by the recitation of the văn chúc (also called văn tế), praising the virtues of and petitioning blessings from the Thành Hoàng. During the third round of wine, cakes, fruits, and tea may also be presented.

The ceremonial cultural program includes the performances Khai châu (ritual opening drum roll to commence the performance), Đại bội, Hát Tuồng, Tôn Vương, and Đưa sắc. The Lễ Khai châu and Đại bội (as previously described), as well as the Lễ Tôn Vương, are carried out by Hát Bội actors and the Ban Quý tế of the đình. While the opera (Hát Bội) is being performed in the courtyard, representatives of the Ban Quý tế carry the offerings down to the front hall, where the Hát Bội troupe is performing, to conduct the ritual and invite the Hát Bội patron deity to the đình for the Lễ Tôn Vương in the main hall.

This ritual carries a symbolic meaning: the king confers the royal decree upon the Thành Hoàng Bồn Cảnh honored in the communal house. The Lễ Đưa sắc is the ceremony of returning the deity's royal decree to its original place. The procedure is carried out in the same manner as during the thỉnh ritual. After this ceremony, the incense burners and the royal decree of all the deities involved in the Lễ Thỉnh sắc are also returned to their respective places of worship.

CONCLUSION

The worship of the Thành Hoàng at Tân An communal house holds great significance in preserving and promoting traditional cultural values within the current movement for building new rural areas.

First, the worship of the Thành Hoàng reflects the community's consciousness of honoring its origins and maintaining national solidarity. Field surveys show that at Tân An communal house, located in Thủ Dầu Một ward, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnamese pioneers who reclaimed the land venerate Duke Nguyen Van Thanh, the first mandarin under the Nguyen dynasty appointed by Emperor Gia Long to guard Thang Long citadel. This demonstrates that the Vietnamese settlers in the newly reclaimed southern land still looked toward the thousand-year-old imperial capital of the nation, as expressed in the verse by Huynh Van Nghe:

“Since the days of bearing swords to open new frontiers,

The southern skies have longed for the land of Thăng Long.”

(Binh Duong Department of Culture and Information, 1999: 277)

Second, the worship of the Thành Hoàng has contributed to building a stronghold for safeguarding the nation and resisting the intrusion of foreign cultures, preventing the rural areas from being transformed through unchecked urbanization. In the memory of the pioneers, faith in the protection and shelter of the khai quốc công thần (founding fathers of the nation) and those who “reclaimed the land and established villages” is crystallized in the symbol of Thành Hoàng worship. During the struggle to defend national independence and achieve reunification, in the Southeast region, the practices of ancestor worship and Thành Hoàng worship, along with communal house, mausoleums and temples dedicated to illustrious figures, through a process of sacralization, became sanctuaries offering protection and shelter to cadres and soldiers during the days of holding fast to the land and staying close to the people. It can be said that the worship of ancestors and the Thành Hoàng has played a role in creating a fortress for defending the nation and resisting the infiltration of foreign cultural elements in the Southeast region in general, and in Ho Chi Minh City in particular.

Third, the Lễ Kỳ Yên is both a vibrant cultural event and the community's village festival, embodying fairness, democracy, and openness in communal life. From early morning on the first day of the Thành Hoàng worship, cờ ngũ sắc (five-colored festival flags) are displayed at the communal house (đình), and the sounds of drums, gongs and mxyu fill the air. Ritual participants - including the Ban Nghi lễ and lễ sinh - wear áo dài and khăn đóng, with preparations completed the night before. Offerings, registered by families and arranged by the Ban Nghi lễ, are placed on the altar of the Thành Hoàng and other deities. At the appointed hour, solemn rites are held under the communal house roof. Before the Thành Hoàng and other revered figures, participants share sacred moments in which personal and communal destinies unite with the cosmos.

The festival features meaningful cultural, artistic, and social exchange activities. In particular, the artistic performances convey moral lessons and conclude with happy endings, bringing joy and educational value to the audience. In the exchanges between communal houses, and between the communal house and political, social, or economic organizations, the rituals are conducted in a warm yet solemn manner. Communal meals during the Lễ Kỳ Yên at the three surveyed communal houses are held in the spirit of celebration and hospitality, with no distinction or discrimination.

Some Recommendations

The area of the former Bình Dương province, now part of Ho Chi Minh City, is one of the key economic centers of the Southeast region. To ensure that economic development does not come at the cost of diminishing traditional culture - including the custom of Thành Hoàng worship - the author proposes the following recommendations:

Firstly, to preserve and promote the cultural value of Thành Hoàng worship and the Kỳ Yên festival, local authorities should restore and maintain communal house. At Tân An communal house, the spacious grounds are largely unused and poorly maintained. Improvements such as caring for ancient trees, planting ornamental plants, creating flower gardens, and paving walkways would harmonize the landscape with the architecture. Preserving the communal house's setting, along with its rituals, helps safeguard the spiritual essence of Southern Vietnam amid ongoing urbanization.

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Secondly, integrate communal house and temple festivals with tourism by developing an eco-spiritual tourism route in northern Ho Chi Minh City. The Southeast region, once known as the “Iron Triangle” during the wars, is now a land of both natural beauty and cultural heritage. Landmarks such as Binh Duong’s 100-year-old ancient house, Tân An communal house, and Mazu Temple are not only historical sites but also spiritual centers. Promoting these sites should highlight not only their tangible heritage but also their living traditions - Thành Hoàng worship, the Mazu Festival, and ancestor veneration - that form the spiritual soul of the region. To attract tourists, establish a river-land route from Bạch Đằng Wharf (District 1, HCMC) along the Sài Gòn River to Binh Duong’s 100-year-old ancient house, Mazu Temple, and Tân An communal house. This route could coincide with major festivals, such as the Mazu Festival (15th day of the first lunar month) and the Thành Hoàng worship (14th day of the 11th lunar month). The river cruise would feature đèn ca từ and moonlit scenery, while visits to temples and communal houses would immerse visitors in local culture.

Thirdly, preservation of communal belief practices, such as Thành Hoàng worship, should be included in the criteria for building new rural areas. These traditions strengthen community solidarity and enrich the spiritual and cultural life of the people.

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