



## The Acculturation of the Worship of Goddess Tianhou in Vietnam



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[ *Abstract* ]

The Chinese began migrating to Vietnam very early (in the third century BC) and continuously underwent either mass or small migration afterwards. Their long processes of living and having contact with different ethnic communities in Vietnam made the Chinese worship of Goddess Tianhou change radically. By examining these practices of worship in two areas where the Chinese settled the most, Thừa Thiên Huế province (central Vietnam) and Hồ Chí Minh City (southern Vietnam), this paper aims to understand the patterns of acculturation of the Chinese community in its new land. An analysis of information from both field research and archival sources will show how the Chinese have changed the worship of the Tianhou goddess during their co-existence with ethnic communities in Vietnam. It argues that there is no “peripheral fossilization” of the Chinese culture in Vietnam.

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## I . Introduction: The Chinese in Vietnam and Their Cult of Goddess Tianhou

Tianhou worship is a folk belief of the Chinese, which emerged in the tenth century on the Meizhou (湄洲) Island in the Fujian (福建) Province of China. This paper investigates how the worship of the Tianhou goddess evolved during the periods in which the Chinese migrated to Vietnam and co-existed with different Vietnamese communities. It seeks to understand the evolution of this cult in two areas where the Chinese settled the most, that is, Thừa Thiên-Huế province (central Vietnam) and Hồ Chí Minh City (southern Vietnam).

The term “acculturation” here means the changes a culture undergoes after it has had long contact with another culture, bearing in mind that many factors impact these changes, and that the changes proceed in different directions. This understanding of acculturation is agreed upon among many authors (Kottak 2005; Ember and Ember 1990: 310, 324; Kroeber 1948; Herskovit 1955; Clifton 1968). This paper also borrows the term peripheral fossilization of American anthropologists such as C. L. Wissler (1870-1947), Franz Boas (1858-1942) and A. L. Kroeber (1876-1960). These American anthropologists have developed the idea of diffusionism at the end of the nineteenth century into the “central and peripheral” theory, to study interchanges and intercontacts of different cultures. This theory holds that each culture is formed from one center, then diffuses to the surrounding area which is called peripheral, which also impacts the center. Some cultural phenomena that spread to the peripheral areas are commonly believed to be “fossilized.” Supposedly conforming to this theory, the Fujian culture of China played the role of the center of the Tianhou worship, while Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries became its peripheral areas. Nevertheless, in this paper will argue, based on an analysis of information from both field research and archival sources, that

there was no peripheral fossilization of the Chinese culture in Vietnam.

Regarding the term “Chinese,” this paper refers to the community that officially defined by the Vietnamese government as those who are of Han Chinese origin, those who belong to Sinicized ethnic minorities in China who then migrated to Vietnam, and those who are descendants of the Han Chinese migrants; they have Vietnamese citizenship, maintain cultural practices of the Han Chinese, especially language and customs, and self-identify as “Hoa people” (Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam – Ban Chấp hành Trung ương 1995).

In China, Tianhou (天后) has different names including Lin Mo (林默), Lin Moniang (林默娘); Ma Zupo (妈祖婆) or Mazu (妈祖), Niangniang (娘娘), Guma (姑妈), and Niangma (娘妈). Mazu, which literally means “mother-ancestor,” is the most popular name. She was conferred by different Chinese dynasties with various royal titles such as Tianfei (天妃), Tianhou (天后), and Tianhou shengmu (天后圣母), the last two titles are of the highest rank. Places to worship Tianhou were called Tianhou gong (天后宫) or Tianhou miao (天后廟).

Studies in China share a common legend about Mazu. She was the daughter of Lin Yuan (林愿), a native of the Meizhou Island in the Putian county (Fujian, China).<sup>1</sup> She is believed to have been born on the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of the third lunar month in 960 and to have died on the 9<sup>th</sup> day of the ninth lunar month in 987.<sup>2</sup> Mazu was

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<sup>1</sup> Some legends in the Fujian region tell that she also had the ability to bless women giving birth as the Avalokitesvara. These new functions arose out of the demand for life and the economic and social situation in China at the time (VCD Documentary: 2006). Also see *16 Incarnations of Mazu: 2004* and *18 Epiphany legends of Mazu: 2004*.

<sup>2</sup> According to another less popular legend, she was born on in 1110 and died in 1119. It is told that while her mother delivered her, a bright red light that was dazzling and fragrant suddenly appeared in the sky; Mazu did not cry during the first month of her age, and for that reason, people called her Lin Mo (林默) or Moniang (默娘). In her youth, Mazu was smart and knowledgeable; she was determined to sacrifice her entire life, along with any prospects of marriage, to save other people from bad fortune. She was also talented at medicine; she cured many sick people and taught people about how to prevent disease. In one instance,

believed to be goddess of agriculture, medicine, peace, and especially the sea. She would usually appear either in dream or in reality, taking the form of a lightly red air-shaped figure, to rescue seafarers from shipwrecks, to support imperial armies fighting with enemies, to protect imperial officials in diplomatic missions, to teach the people how to cure epidemics, to fight drought, and to prevent floods and the coming of pirates. She was worshipped by all people, particularly sea traders, mariners, and fishermen (Li 1994; Yang 2012; China Central Television 2006).

Today, both the Chinese in China and overseas Chinese perform ritual ceremonies for Mazu in various shrines, temples, family altars, and communal halls called “House of Friendship” on the first and the fifteenth day of every lunar month. Similar ritual ceremonies are also performed on her birth and death anniversaries. (Li 1994: 135-46; Yang 2012: 135-37; China Central Television: 2006). In the past, the Qing dynasty of China recognized Goddess Mazu and organized these ritual ceremonies at the central court. It was a prevalent practice that common people offered incense sticks and garlands and donated money at the shrines of Mazu. Yet, there were differences from one region to another. At some places, people frequently changed the clothes on the statue of Mazu, but they did not in some other places. People living at coastal areas usually organized the ceremonies at shores; they prepared flowers, various offerings (often meats of chicken, duck, pig, goat, and fish) and incense to pray to the goddess for peace. At the end of the ceremonies, people released the flowers and poured wine into the sea in order to show their respect for the goddess. During these ceremonies, people also organized folk-performances such as dragon, lion, and umbrella dances. There were also activities such as the recitation of poetry, circus performing, processions, and stilt walking (Yang 2012: 135-37).

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knowing that her father and her brothers had an accident while fishing at sea, Mazu practiced meditation at home in order to draw a magical force to save them from afar. Having thought that Mazu was sleeping, her mother tried to wake her up at once, which resulted in the loss of one of her brothers (although some legends say that it was actually her father whom they have lost). At the age of twenty-eight, Mazu died without any signs of disease.

The Chinese carried the cult of Mazu to Vietnam when they arrived. Consistent and long interactions with different communities in Vietnam changed the way that Chinese performed cultural rituals in general and the worship of the Mazu goddess in particular.

In Vietnam, places to worship the Mazu goddess usually have signboards, which say Tianhou gong (天后宮) or Tianhou miao (天后廟). However, since people in northern Vietnam normally call the Mazu goddess “Tianhou” or “Mu” (母), temples and shrines devoted to this goddess are often called the Mu Temple or the Mu Shrine. People in central Vietnam call Mazu “Po” or “Tianhou” and her shrines or temples are accordingly called the Po Temple or the Tianhou Palace. In southern Vietnam, Mazu is known by different titles depending on the ethnic groups which worship her. The Kinh people call her “Po” while different Chinese groups refer to her by other different names. The Chinese of Chaozhou origin call her A Ma (阿媽), which also means Po, Mazhu (馬珠), a variation of Mazu, or A Po (阿婆). The Chinese of Guangdong origin call her A Fu (阿扶), which means “adopted mother,” or Mazu (馬祖). The Chinese of Fujian origin call her Mazu. The Chinese of Hainan origin refer to her as Ma Chou or Ma, which means “mother.” Scholars who have written about the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam usually refer to the Mazu goddess as Tianhou, and this paper will follow this custom. In the following sections, the paper will illustrate that changes in the worship of the Mazu goddess vary from one Chinese community in Vietnam to another mainly because of the different waves of migration and inhabitation patterns of the Chinese in the new land.

## **II . The Acculturation of the Worship of the Tianhou Goddess in the Minh Hương village in Thừa Thiên – Huế Province**

The first settling place of the Chinese in Thừa Thiên – Huế province is the Minh Hương village, today located in the Minh Thanh hamlet of Hương Vinh commune of the Hương Trà district. According to conventional understanding in Vietnam, Minh Hương is the name of the Chinese people who migrated to Vietnam after the Ming dynasty collapsed in 1644. Most of them were the Ming loyalists who arrived

Vietnam in the late seventeenth century. Many male individuals of the Minh Hương village were married to Vietnamese women, and their children eventually became Vietnamese. These people were granted Vietnamese residency by the Nguyen rulers and were allowed to form their own villages. Generally, their villages looked similar to the villages of the local Kinh people.<sup>3</sup> These villages were named “Minh Hương.” Prior to the twentieth century, the Minh Hương people were apparently treated as Kinh people. They were allowed to study and attend civil service examinations in order to obtain government positions. At the same time, they were obligated to dress like local Vietnamese people and follow other cultural rituals. Today, the Chinese who did not convert to Vietnamese citizenship live outside Minh Hương villages and do not follow Vietnamese customs. These people are identified as “Hoa kiều” or overseas Chinese. It is a common belief in Vietnam that the Minh Hương village grew its own culture in ways that are far different than those of the Chinese and rather similar to local communities with whom they co-existed and eventually intermarried.

Minh Hương in Thừa Thiên – Huế province initially engaged in trade and commercial business at the international Thanh Hà port. This harbor was constructed in the seventeenth century and it developed prosperously until the early nineteenth century. However, as sand increasingly filled up the mouth of the Thanh Hà river, boats and ships eventually could not pass nor dock at the port. This ecological change was one of the key factors that led to the decline of the Thanh Hà port in the late nineteenth century (Chế 1982). In the aftermath, members of the Minh Hương village were confronted with two choices: either they migrate to overseas Chinese communities and continue their trade or they stay in their village, shift to agriculture and marry Kinh people. The evidence shows that many Minh Hương people moved close to these overseas Chinese communities and continued their trade. This process led them to return to their traditional culture. In other words, they were “re-sinicized.” This return, however, is not a restoration to the origin but a restoration to basic traditional Chinese culture that adapted

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<sup>3</sup> Today, the Kinh or “Viet” is one of fifty-four ethnic groups recognized by the Vietnam government, accounting for 90% of the national population.

some Vietnamese cultural elements. This, therefore, is not a peripheral fossil.

Those who remained at the Minh Hương village gradually became agriculturalists; they bought land from the Kinh people of nearby villages to lease commercial real estate, tend fields, and make graveyards for the dead. Until 1975, farming was the main productive activity of the Minh Hương people in Thừa Thiên – Huế. They cultivated crops, vegetables, and plants of the local Kinh people, used the same farming tools, and followed the same farming calendar as their Vietnamese neighbors (Đào 1943; Trần 1961; Chế 1982; Nguyễn 1995).

As the Kinh people from nearby areas also migrated into the Minh Hương village, mixed marriages occurred more often between the Chinese and the incoming migrants. Consequently, many aspects of Kinh culture, such as methods of production, marriage rituals, the ritual performance of the “life-circle,” and kinship structure, increasingly penetrated the Chinese village, creating radical changes in the cultural, social and economic lives of the Chinese. In other words, lasting and vital processes of co-existence and intermarriage with the Kinh people have changed the cultural patterns of the Minh Hương people in ways that have drawn them closer to the Kinh people themselves. Until now, wedding and death rituals of the Minh Hương people have completely followed those of the Kinh people. Additionally, the Minh Hương people also name their descendants in accordance with the Kinh tradition - that is, they retain the same middle name through many generations. In contrast, the original Minh Hương practice was to use a different middle name for different generations (Chế 1982: 48-50). The influence of the Vietnamese Kinh culture is also present in some types of folk culture of the Minh Hương people, including old tales, folk poems, and folk songs. These tales and songs recount the beauty of their villages in Vietnam. The Minh Hương also learned the ballad of pounding rice and the singing style of “trading twos,” often performed by a pair of a male and a female singer, which is very popular in Kinh culture. The Minh Hương people used the Vietnamese language as their first language, and they are even able to use the Huế dialect to compose folk-songs, such as “dòm vô,”

“chậu mô,” and “Ôn cha mô tổ mi” (Chế 1982: 110).

In 1982, the Minh Hương village in Thừa Thiên – Huế had a population of 278 people, 66.% of which are Kinh and 33.1% Chinese (Chế 1982: 14, 20). In the present-day, the village has only ten families with sixty-nine Chinese-origin members.<sup>4</sup> They are Chinese in origin but they identify themselves as “Kinh people of Chinese origin,” in their personal documents such as IDs and household registers. The “Chinese-ness” of people in the Minh Hương village is vague, located only somewhere in family names that are seldom in Kinh communities, such as Hàu, La, Lâm, Nhan, Nhiêu, Hứa, Từ, and Khu. That is to say, the Minh Hương people completely followed local culture. They bond in blood with Kinh people over many generations, do not know any language except Vietnamese, and do not have any family connections back in China. In other words, choosing to stay in the Minh Hương village makes the Chinese become Kinh people—the result of voluntary assimilation.

Similarly, the Tianhou cult of Minh Hương changed radically when it was practiced in the lands of Vietnam. The Tianhou temple is called “Chùa Bà” (Temple of Grandmother) in Vietnamese and “Thiên Hậu cung” (Tianhou Palace) in Sino-Vietnamese. The temple was built around 1685 and was located in the former Minh Hương village, which belongs to the present-day Minh Thanh hamlet of Hương Vinh commune, Hương Trà district, Thừa Thiên Huế province.

The temple was initially constructed with materials imported from China and followed traditional Chinese architecture. Statues and other objects of worship were also brought from China. However, renovations often led to the use of local materials, such as Bát Tràng bricks, Bửu Long stones, Biên Hòa pottery, as well as the recruitment of Kinh artisans and architects. As a result, the temple in the present-day heavily carries Kinh architectural styles, with the Chinese statues and many objects of worship completely disappearing by (see figure 1 and 2). Vietnamese architect Đỗ Thị Thanh Mai comments that the style of “trùng thiềm điệp ốc” (double

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<sup>4</sup> Data are provided by Mr. T, head of Minh Thanh commune on April 19, 2018.

eaves and connected buildings) present in the roof of the temple is in fact typical of the traditional architecture in Huế, strongly influenced by style during the reign of King Khải Định (1916-1925) (Đỗ 2010: 137).

The temple includes three chambers. The statue of Goddess Tianhou is located at the central chamber. Beside Tianhou are other local gods and spirituals, including twelve goddesses of good wishes for newborn babies, three goddesses of childbirth, and Văn Xương - Phúc Đức (i.e., good stars in horoscope that carry prosperity and the good merits of a family). Other village headmen's cults are also worshipped in this place. The chamber on the right side is used to pray to the first settler of a new land ("tiền hiền"), the City God, and the village leaders of the past. The chamber on the left side is used for villagers to gather and discuss public issues. The Tianhou temple in the Minh Hương village is a complex building that embraces a holistic design of a Daoist temple, a Buddhist temple, and a Vietnamese-style communal house. It functions as a religious and cultural center of people living in the Minh Hương village today.



<Figure 1> The Tianhou temple in Minh Hương village, Thừa Thiên -Huế province. Source: Phan Thi Hoa Ly, Date taken: 10/2/2014



<Figure 2> “Tiền hiền” house of worship in the Tianhou Temple in Minh Hương village, Thừa Thiên –Huế province. Source: Phan Thi Hoa Ly, Date taken: 10/2/2014

The results of my fieldwork in 2010 indicate that, prior to 1975, the Tianhou temple in Thua Thien-Hue organized thirteen annual rituals as followed:

<Table 1> Thirteen annual rituals at the Tianhou temple before 1975

No	Name of Ritual	Objects of Worship	Reason for Worship	Time in lunar calendar
1	Tết (Vietnamese New Year)	Gods in the Temple	Welcoming New Year	The 30 <sup>th</sup> of the twelfth Lunar Month – First lunar month 2
2	Prayer for Peace at the beginning of the lunar year (Worshipping the Spring)	Gods in the Temple	Prayer for peace and good season for all villagers	The fifteenth of the first lunar month
3	Rituals of “cổ con” (small party) and “cổ lớn” (big party)	The three goddesses of childbirth, twelve midwives, and Văn Xương - Phúc Đức	Prayer for the Minh Hương people who want to have sons. Minh Hương people may also pray in order to have sons and, generally, many children and grandchildren	The fifteenth of the firth lunar month

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No	Name of Ritual	Objects of Worship	Reason for Worship	Time in lunar calendar
4	Women's Festival	The three goddesses of childbirth and twelve midwives	For women who want to have children. Women receive the Tianhou refuge during the Tianhou refuge ceremony, as in a typical Buddhist refuge ceremony.	The sixteenth of the first lunar month and the eighteenth of the Firth lunar month
5	Văn Xương - Phúc Đức	Văn Xương - Phúc Đức	New-year writing and poem reciting by highly-educated scholars	The second of the second lunar month
6	Spirit of Tianhou's birth	Tianhou goddess	Anniversary of the Tianhou goddess's birthday	The twenty third of the third Lunar Month
7	Five Elements	Five Elements which are also composed of five women: Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Soil	Anniversary of Five Women's Spirit Day	The tenth of the sixth Lunar Month
8	Tiền hiền (asking for prosperity and blessing)	Officials and meritorious people of the village, who are called "tiền hiền"	Expressing gratitude to "tiền hiền" and asking for prosperity for villagers	The fifteenth of the seventh Lunar Month
9	Spirit of the goddess Tianhou	Goddess Tianhou	Tianhou's death anniversary	The ninth of the ninth Lunar Month
10	The City God	The Spirit of City God	Express gratitude to the City God	The sixteenth of the eleventh Lunar Month
11	Trần Tiễn Thành's death anniversary <sup>5</sup>	Grandfather of the village Trần Tiễn Thành	Express gratitude to those who sacrificed for the village	Twenty-second of the eleven Lunar Month
12	Tomb-sweeping Festival	Ancestors	Performing ceremonies at ancestors' graves	Sixteenth of the Twelfth Lunar Month
13	Winter Solstice Festival	Sky and Earth	Change of seasons	Eleven Lunar Month

<sup>5</sup> Trần Tiễn Thành (陳踐誠, 1813-1883) was a Minh Hương people. His father was Trần Dương Thuận, a Chinese of Fujian origin and an official of Ming dynasty. When the Qing dynasty came into power, Trần Dương Thuận fled to Vietnam and settled there for the rest of his life. Trần Tiễn Thành was smart and studied well. In 1838 he obtained a doctoral degree in the Chinese-style civil service examination

The present-day Tianhou Temple organizes the following ritual ceremonies:

<Table 2> Eight annual rituals in the Tianhou temple nowadays

No	Ritual	Worshipped Objects	Worshipping Content	Time
1	Tết	Gods in the temple	Welcoming New Year	Thirtieth of the twelfth Lunar Month – the second of the first Lunar Month
2	Prayer for Peace at the beginning of the year (Worshipping the Spring)	Gods in the temple	Prayer for peace and good season for all villagers	The fifteenth of the first Lunar month
3	Women’s festival	The three goddesses of childbirth and twelve midwives	For women who want to have children. Women receive the Tianhou refuge during the Tianhou refuge ceremony, as in a typical Buddhist refuge ceremony.	The sixteenth of the first Lunar month 16
4	Tế Văn Xương, Phúc Đức	Văn Xương, Phúc Đức	Students pray for studying well and passing exams	The second of the second Lunar month and examination seasons
5	Tianhou’s birth	Goddess Tianhou	Anniversary of the Tianhou goddess’s birthday	The twenty-third of the third Lunar month
6	Tiền hiền (asking for prosperity and blessing)	Officials and meritorious people of the village, who are called “tiền hiền”	Expressing gratitude to “tiền hiền” and asking for prosperity for villagers	The fifteenth of the seven Lunar month
7	Death anniversary of grandfather Trần Tiên Thành	Grandfather Trần Tiên Thành	Express gratitude to those who sacrificed for the village	The twenty-second of the eleventh Lunar month

and then became a high-ranked official of the Nguyen dynasty. He made great contributions to the Minh Hương village as he bought land to expand the village, built graveyards for the dead, and put up free shelters (usually called Peaceful House) for homeless people. He also set up the rituals to worship Tianhou and issued regulations for dining at the Po Temple. The Minh Hương villagers considered him as the Protector of the Village.

8	Visiting the Ancestors' tomb	Ancestors	Worshipping and taking care of ancestor's tombs	The Sixteenth of the twelfth Lunar month
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Comparing the above two tables, worshipping activities at the Tianhou Temple have changed radically since 1975. Some rituals have completely disappeared, such as that of the “Big Party,” “Goddess Tianhou’s death anniversary,” “City God,” “Five Elements,” and Winter Solstice Festival. The City-God and “Five Elements” are gods of the Kinh people and they are worshipped at shrines located at the border of the Minh Huong village. In the past, the Minh Huong people bought land from the nearby Kinh people in order to expand their village, leading them to worship at the shrines that already existed on the land they bought. During the birth anniversaries of these gods, the Minh Huong people performed ceremonies both at the shrines and at the Tianhou Temple.

Meanwhile, the remaining rituals transformed in terms of form and content. For example, the “Women’s Festival” integrated rituals of Kinh people. In the past, Minh Huong women organized this ritual. They placed all offerings on the altar of the Twelve Midwives goddesses. If they wanted to have daughters, they offered the goddesses gold bracelets, trays, and bands; if they wanted to have sons, they offered bands that attached with silver or gold bells. Afterwards, when they delivered babies, they asked the goddesses for their permission to take these offerings back for their children. The performance of the “Women’s Festival” in the past embraced aspects of the traditional Chinese culture. However, in the present-day, any childless women can pray at the Temple any time and their offerings are various and undetermined. Moreover, the Văn Xương - Phúc Đức rites have almost disappeared. Instead, students who want to pass their examinations might randomly turn to these gods. The Minh Huong people used to visit their ancestors’ graves on the Tomb-sweeping Festival, which occurs on the third day of the third lunar month. However, in the present-day, they follow the Kinh people’s custom, that is, visiting graves at the end of the year. On the third day of the third lunar month, the Minh Huong people visit the graves of those who do not have children often located on the An Cùu Mountain in Huế. On the first and the

fifteenth day of every lunar month, monks residing at the temple prepare fruits and flowers to worship the Buddha.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, in addition, the Yulan Festival is even annually organized at this temple. These changes indicate strong the influence of Vietnamese Buddhism on the Tianhou Temple.

The acculturation of the worship of the Tianhou goddess can be observed in the way that local authorities appropriated the Minh Hương. The Nguyễn Dynasty (1802-1945), the last imperial power of Vietnam, ordained the Tianhou goddess four times with significant titles in the years 1826, 1831, 1842, and 1850. The Nguyễn court dispatched its high officials, including ministers and provincial heads, to lead the ceremonies for the Tianhou goddess (Huỳnh 1997: 37). Moreover, regulations of ritual processes and food intakes in the Tianhou Temple were completely similar to those in the Kinh's communal houses: the worshipping committee included a ritual master and a ritual assistant master, both wearing blue robes and official headwear. The ritual ceremonies include three parts: the opening, the main process, and the ending sections. Each section included practices of offering wine and tea, burning oration texts, and a closing ritual. The offerings must include three kinds of meat—beef, goat meat, and pork. Participants in the temple are seated in the order of age and position in the village. Trần Tiến Thành, a court official of the Nguyễn Dynasty, set up all of these regulations, which remain to the present-day.

The acculturation of the Tianhou goddess is also observable in changes in stories about the appearance, family record, and the characters and missions of Tianhou in the Minh Hương village. It is visible that the Tianhou goddess in the Minh Hương village carries physical and cultural characteristics different from the Tianhou goddess in China. A grandson of the Minh Hương people, who is self-identified as a Kinh person, told me:

The Tianhou goddess lives in boats; she has twelve miracles. Chinese

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<sup>6</sup> In 2004, an overseas contingent of Vietnamese of Minh Hương origin from the United States donated a standing statue of Avalokiteśvara. The Minh Hương people built a small pond with a rock garden next to the meeting chamber. The statue was then placed at the middle of the pond.

people worship the Tianhou goddess on boats so that their sea travelling may be propitious. Even if people fall into calamity, they just need to sit on their knees, pray to the Tianhou goddess, and the calamity will be over immediately. The Tianhou goddess is very helpful.<sup>7</sup>

For a long time, villagers have called the Tianhou goddess “Mother Goddess,” and many females of old age have taken refuge under the patronage of Tianhou. Since 2000, people have installed Buddhist temple-styled-radiant lights behind the statue of Tianhou, which makes it look like the statue of Avalokiteśvara. The temple also permits the practice of spiritual writings and divination by drawing lots. By these, one may predict the health and luck of the village during the year. The practices of ritual money-lending and offering-return currently appear at the temple, which is similar to that being done at the temple of Lady of the Storehouse by the Kinh people.

A researcher named H.Đ.K shared with me that when he visited the temple around 1990, he saw that there was a wallet on one of the hands of the Tianhou goddess statue. He asked the temple priest and was told that a traveler returned the money he borrowed to the goddess.<sup>8</sup>

Today, people come to the Tianhou goddess, praying for all sorts of things they wish, including good health, peace, intelligence, successful studies, the ability to bargain well, passing examinations, and promotion. Many people consider the Tianhou goddess as Avalokiteśvara, Mother Goddess, or Lady of Storehouse because all of them are powerful, able to save people from danger, and grant their wishes.

In the past, offerings include food typical in Chinese communities such as abalone, shark fin soup, steamed fish, stewed chicken, and toasted lamb. In contemporary times, offerings have become more oriented towards Hué culture, with “bánh ít” (little cake), “bánh phu thê” (husband-wife cake), “bánh ướt” (wet cake), tangerine,

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Mr. L.N.C., born in 1958, on October 2, 2014, at the Tianhou Temple

<sup>8</sup> Interviews with researcher H.Đ.K on October 5, 2014 in Hue City.

gandaria, and mangosteen. Food typical of the Kinh people, such as green bean-mixed sticky rice, sweet gourd-mixed sticky rice, boiled pork, and boiled chicken, are familiar offerings at the Tianhou temple as well. The only offering which bears similarity to Chinese culture in the present-day is fried pork, an essential item in ceremonies at the temple. The language used in praying and practicing other rituals at the temple is Vietnamese. Although the present priest is of the Minh Hương of the third generation, he identifies himself as a member of the Kinh people of Minh Hương origin. Members of the Association for the Management of the Temple and Worshippers are also Kinh.

The acculturation of the worship of Tianhou goddess is the result of the long settlement of Minh Hương people into Vietnam, their acquisition of Vietnamese citizenship, and their willingness to leave their Chinese culture behind to follow the customs and rituals of the Kinh people in Vietnam. Nowadays, it is difficult to differentiate people of Minh Hương origin and Kinh people in the Minh Hương village. This is the reason why Trần Kinh Hòa (a.k.a. Chen Cheng Ho),<sup>9</sup> a famous scholar in the research of Chinese in Southeast Asia, commented sixty years ago, that the Minh Hương village “is Viet-ized completely, looking completely like other Vietnamese villages; nothing is different” (Trần 1961: 96).

### **III. The Acculturation of Worship of the Tianhou Goddess in Ho Chi Minh City**

The Chinese have migrated to Ho Chi Minh City beginning the late seventeenth century, largely settling around the Chợ Lớn area (parts of present-day District 4, 5 and 11). There were other waves of Chinese migration in this area in the late nineteenth and the early

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<sup>9</sup> His name in English is Chen Cheng Ho. He is a Taiwanese professor of Southeast Asian History. He used to be affiliated with University of Huế, University of Saigon, and University of Đà Lạt of Republic of Vietnam during the Vietnam War. His research is published in different languages including Chinese, English, Vietnamese and French. He uses Trần Kinh Hòa to byline his research in Vietnamese. He is particularly famous in Vietnam and in Southeast Asian for a considerable number of achievements in studying Chinese people in Vietnam.

twentieth centuries. Since the late eighteenth century, Chợ Lớn is home to the largest Chinese population in Vietnam. The population of Chinese radically dropped when between Vietnam-China soured between 1976 to 1979: three fourths of Chinese migrants left the country. Regardless, Chợ Lớn is still the place with the highest population density of Chinese people, consisting of 50% of Chinese people throughout Vietnam and 90% in southern Vietnam. The Chinese in Chợ Lớn include five groups—the Guangdong, Fujian, Chaozhou, Hainan, and Hakkas. Each group has its own place of Tianhou goddess worship. Moreover, the population density of Chinese is not the same in different areas in Ho Chi Minh City; specifically, 70% percent of them live separately in District 5 and 11, while the remaining are scattered in peripheral wards such as Nhà Bè and Cù Chi.

In areas with the largest and densest Chinese population who live separately from other ethnic communities, worship of the Tianhou goddess maintains a particular Chinese characteristic. In these areas, the Tianhou goddess is worshipped in the Tuệ Thành Clubhouse located in district 5. Chinese people from Tuệ Thành, an alternate name of Guangzhou (Guangdong province, China) constructed the Clubhouse in 1760. Initially, the Chinese used materials imported from China for the house. It was later repaired with materials from Vietnam under the restoration project, which has been active since 1996. The building presents characteristics of traditional Chinese architecture (see figure 3).

It has four closed chambers and three chapels; among these chapels is an oculus to draw natural light for shrines and to release smoke from burning incense. A variety of pottery styles engraved with symbols of Chinese culture and history is attached to the porches of the building and on the shrine roof. There are a number of horizontal lacquered boards inscribed with images and verses that aim to eulogize the victories of the Chinese gods worshipped in the Clubhouse.

The building is historically recorded as “a temple famous for its being oldest, wealthiest, the most exquisite, and the most well preserved in the area [Chợ Lớn]” (Vuong 2004: 183). Thus, the

Clubhouse demonstrates that Chinese people have maintained their culture even though they have lived in Vietnamese land for a long time.

Many Chinese characters are honored in the Clubhouse, including Mazu, Caishen (God of Wealth), “Hoa ông” (Chinese Gentlemen), “Hoa bà” (Chinese Lady), Tudigong (Lord of the Soil and the Ground), Longmu niangniang (Queen of the Heavenly Water Palace), Avalokiteśvara, Guan Yu, Fude zhengshen (Lords of Mercy and Happiness), and Môn quan vương tả (Lord of Gate).



<Figure 3> Tuệ Thành assembly hall in Hồ Chí Minh City. Source: Phan Thi Hoa Ly, Date taken: 04/23/2011.

The most important rite at the Tuệ Thành Clubhouse is done during Mazu’s birthday, on the twentieth-third day of the third lunar month. The performance of this ceremony is typical for Chinese people from Guangdong.

In my field research in 2011, I observed that the ritual of bathing the goddess (“mộc dục”) took place on late-night twenty-first and early-morning twenty-second of the third lunar month. On these days, people cleaned the temple, put on lights, and

made flower strings. On the twenty-third of the third Lunar month, the committee performed the ritual of worshipping Tianhou.

On these days, members of the Clubhouse association cleaned the clubhouse, put on string lights, and stitched flowers, while crowds of people came to pray. In the morning of the twenty third of the third Lunar month, male members of the managing committee of the Clubhouse performed rituals of worship for the Tianhou goddess. They wore suits, where a flower was attached on the chest as a sign that the ceremony is on. They lined up in two queues in front of the central altar.

The chair of the committee played the role of the ritual master, standing in the center while the two deputy chairs and other members of the Association stood on either side of him. A woman took the role of ritual speaker. After the gong was sounded three times, the ritual participants lowered their heads three times as well. Then, the master burnt three big incense sticks, while other members burnt small incense sticks; all of them continued bowing three times. The ritual master poured three cups of wine and three cups of tea into a Nine-Tripod Cauldron. Then the woman recited an oration about Tianhou in the Guangzhou dialect. After the oration, people stood solemnly, their hands straight down and their heads slightly lowered, to show respect for the goddess (see figure 4).

After that, the master brought a tray containing “lots” for people to draw. This is for the selection of a person to perform the ritual of sealing the Tianhou goddess’s stamp and carry the sacred casket. The selected persons came closer to the altar of the Tianhou goddess, where the casket of stamp may be found.

After another sounding of the gong, one of the two selected persons opened the casket while the other took the seal to stamp on the two red pieces of *dó* paper the phrases “khai ân đại kết” (opening grace, grand solidarity) and “hợp cảnh bình an” (harmonious with natural scenes and peace). In the meantime, many people came to pray to the Tianhou goddess.



<Figure 4> A Tianhou in Tuệ Thành clubhouse in Hồ Chí Minh City. Source: Phan Thi Hoa Ly, Date taken: 04/26/2011

Moreover, the participants offered to the goddess typical Chinese cuisine, such as the so-called “bánh quy”, sea crab, stir-fried rice noodle, dumplings, and pudding, all of which were presented alongside burning incense, candles, flowers, and fruits.

“Bánh quy” is actually a type of vegetarian Chinese bun on which people inscribed images of turtles. Many “bánh quy” are often put on a big tray to form a tower of buns. According to a Chinese belief, “bánh quy” symbolizes longevity. Also, roasted hog is a mandatory offering for the Tianhou goddess in official rituals. Noticeably, three kinds of herbs, including lettuce, onion, and celery, were added in the stir-fried rice noodle dish and “bánh quy.” Pilgrims believe that “these three herbs are for smartness, brightness, and providence because their Chinese names rhyme with the pronunciation of those merits.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with worshippers on the ceremony day of the Tianhou goddess’s birthday (Third Lunar month 23, 2011) according to the lunar calendar (Fourth Lunar month 26, 2011 in solar calendar) at the Tuệ Thành clubhouse.

Poorer people offer the goddess incense, cooking oil, and some money<sup>11</sup>. On festival days, the clubhouse committee usually appoints its female members to perform rituals for prayer. In this case, pilgrims give their offerings to Chinese women at the central shrine. These women receive offerings and pour more oil into seven-top-kerosene lamps before making vows. They vow either in Chinese, if they are Chinese, or in Vietnamese if they are of the Kinh people. Here, people usually buy many towels and baby-shirts to ask for Mother Tianhou's stamp so that those who use them will always be in good health, peace, and blessed with good luck (see figure 5).



<Figure 5> People worshipping Tianhou. Source: Phan Thi Hoa Ly, Date taken: 04/26/2011

On Tianhou's birthday, people also make offerings of hats, clothes, and jewelries. The Hoa people believe that people only receive the goddess's grace if she uses the things that have been offered. Therefore, the clubhouse association amended the frequency of changing the goddess's dress. Before, people change the goddess's dress once a year. Today, during festival days, the goddess is made to wear all offered dresses, even for a minute. This

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<sup>11</sup> Incense and cooking oil are used to burn seven-top-kerosene lamps.

assures association members of being recognized by the goddess.

Beside Tianhou's birth anniversary, people also come to the clubhouse for prayer whenever they have issues to resolve. On the first and fifteenth day of the month, more people come to pray at the clubhouse. Additionally, fifteen other ceremonies over the course of the year are held in the clubhouse.

These include the following: Tet's Collective Greeting on the second of the fifth Lunar month; Lamp Hanging Ceremony (lễ Khánh dâng) on the first of the eighth Lunar month; the Taking-off of the Lamp Ceremony (lễ Hoàn dâng) on first of the tenth Lunar month; honoring the Protector of Land's Spirit on the second of the second Lunar month; the Worshipping of Spring (one day before the Qīngmíng festival); the praying to the Spirit of Kim Hue Lady (Mother of Blesses) on the first of the fourth Lunar month; the Dragon Boat Festival on the fifth of Fifth Lunar month; the praying to the Spirit of the Queen of Heavenly Water Palace on the fifth of the fourth Lunar month; the praying to the Spirit of General Guan Ping on the thirteenth of the Fifth Lunar month; the praying to the Spirit of General Guan Yu on the twentieth fourth of the sixth Lunar month; the praying to the Spirit of Caishen (God of Wealth) on the twenty second of the seventh Lunar month; the worshipping of Autumn on the ninth of the eighth Lunar month (clubhouse committee members visit the founders of the Chinese communities); the worshipping of Winter in the Eleventh Lunar month (oranges and glutinous rice balls in boozy sweet soup); the celebrating of the Open Grace on Twelfth Lunar Month 12; the Meeting at the End of the Year on Twelfth Lunar Month 28); and New Year's Eve (Night of Twelfth Lunar Month 30).

Local culture influenced the design and appearance of the Clubhouse. In 1993, the Ministry of Culture and Information of Vietnam recognized the Clubhouse as a National Art and Architecture Building according to Decision no.43-VH/QĐ, issued on January 7, 1993. On the walls of the Clubhouse, people can recognize many familiar images of Vietnamese creatures such as racing forest animals, singing birds, blooming flowers, gourd rigs, and bouquets of lotus. Verses on pairs of wood panels present the

Chinese's affection for their second-homeland, Vietnam:

海国偏慈航,水德参天,横览闽云连粤嵩;  
湄洲隆懿范,坤仪配地,永留越岛护华侨

At seas are available good boats, Mazu's merits echo to the Heavenly Sky, which guild clouds of the Min country to connect with the mountain of Vietnam.

Mi Chau violates the Kingdom's rule in intention, and Mazu's righteousness helps to expand the land, maintaining the Vietnamese land for the overseas Chinese (Lê 2000: 52).

When the Clubhouse underwent renovation in 1996, its association utilized local materials. For example, the big gong at the central shrine was made by the traditional gong-crafting villagers in northern Vietnam. Ceramic objects in the house were bought from traditional kilns in Đồng Hoà (District 8) and Bửu Nguyên (District 5); they are made of clay derived from Biên Hoà in Đồng Nai province.

In 1989, while repairing the pond, the association hired artists to carve two reliefs with nine dragons and five goats on the walls of the Clubhouse. The Hoa people called the "nine dragons" "Cửu Long," a homonym of the Cửu Long River Delta (i.e., Mekong River Delta), the land on which they currently reside. "Five goats" are called "Ngũ Dương," a homonym of their original homeland named Wuyang, a district in Guangdong (China). The reliefs demonstrate the idea that the Hoa people have two homelands, "Wuyang" in China and "Cửu Long" in Vietnam.

The languages used in ritual performance at the Tuệ Thành Clubhouse are Kinh and Hoa. On gravestones, myths about the Tianhou goddess are carved in the Hoa and Vietnamese languages, while calendars and certificates of merit granted by local governments are all in Vietnamese. The Hoa people in Tuệ Thành Clubhouse are both Chinese and Kinh people. Today, participants of ceremonies at the Clubhouse include not only Hoa people but also Kinh people living nearby.

Since the late 1990s, the custom of borrowing money from the

Tianhou goddess and returning offerings to her emerged at the Clubhouse. On Tianhou's birthday, people engaging in trade and commercial activities usually present the goddess with offerings so as to return money they borrowed from her in the previous years, and in order to make new loans from her. Money borrowed from the goddess is usually small, typically symbolic, and are placed in red envelopes. Money returned to the goddess is always bigger than the amount borrowed and people usually donate directly to the clubhouse committee for their record. Those successful return money generously. This practice indicates the influence of customs originating from Bắc Ninh, a province in northern Vietnam.

In short, the worship of the Tianhou goddess at the Tuệ Thành Clubhouse maintains many aspects of traditional Chinese culture while it displays some local Vietnamese elements such as temple architecture, cult offerings, and carved verses. The acculturation of the Chinese in this case follows what W. Berry (2003) calls the strategy of "separation." This community of Chinese is very flexible in bending and changing some of their traditional cultural practices in order to adjust well in the new land. Obviously, this also shows the absence of peripheral fossilization in the Tianhou worship in Vietnam.

By contrast, in areas where the Chinese lived with local people, acculturation is more vital. Beside Chợ Lớn, Nhà Bè is a Chinese settlement but with a smaller number of settlers. According to a record issued on April 1, 2009, Nhà Bè is made up of 99,172 people of different ethnicities, such as Kinh, Hoa, Chăm, Khmer, Tày, and Nùng. Hoa compose 480.<sup>12</sup> The Hoa people in Nhà Bè are descendants of those who migrated to Hồ Chí Minh City before 1975. Inter marriages with the Kinh produced mixed ethnicities, who in later generations, identified themselves as Kinh people of Hoa origin.

At Nhà Bè, there is only one joss house temple for worship of the Tianhou goddess. It is located at the Phước Kiến commune, where Kinh, Chăm, Hoa, and Khmer people coexisted. The Kinh people constitute the majority. Agriculture once became Phước

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<sup>12</sup> Data provided by People Association of Nhà Bè Ward on May 18, 2013.

Kiến's primary industry, only to be reduced by urbanization. The joss house temple is very small, just 2x2.5 m in size; it is located in a hut built in the center of a lake (see figure 6). At the entrance gate, there is a signboard, which says "the Nhà Bè ward - Vietnamese Fatherland Front of Phước Kiến commune – Shrine of the Tianhou Goddess – Holy Mother of the Realm, the Great Grandmother, Lady of Five Elements." The signboard is filled with the names of goddesses worshipped at the temple. The local government's involvement in managing this shrine is visible. The shrine faces west and it was constructed with bricks, painted with lime, and covered with tiles. The gates and doors of the shrine were designed by Mr. L.M.Đ. He drew some string flowers and painted a few Sino-Vietnamese verses to accompany them.



<Figure 6> The Tianhou Temple in Phước Kiến village, Nhà Bè district, Hồ Chí Minh City. Source: Phan Thi Hoa Ly, Date taken: 05/4/2011.

The architecture, design, material, and cult worship in the shrine are shaped by Kinh culture. At the rooftop hangs a big drum and in front of the altar is a statue of storks riding a tortoise. A woman donated this statue to the shrine in 2004, which was apparently intended to make it appear similar to a typical village communal house of the Kinh people.

There is a site dedicated to the worship of the Earth and the Agriculture God, Shennong, in front of the above-mentioned shrine.

Inside this shrine, one may pray to the Tianhou goddess, the Holy Mother of the Realm, the Great Grandmother, the Lady of Five Elements, and Avalokiteśvara. Images of these goddesses have been put side by side (see figure 7).

The signboard shows that Tianhou is the principal goddess. However, it is the Great Grandmother Lady who is worshipped at the central place. The drawings, lines, contents and structure of the painting of the Great Grandmother are completely similar to tablets; the difference is that the painting placed in a cloth embedded in mirror while it is in the tablets. The phrase, “Respectfully inviting the Great Grandmother to have a sit” (恭请祖姑座位 *Cung thỉnh tổ cô tọa vị*), is carved in Chinese characters on the central column, with “Great Grandmother” set in a bigger size. The two sides come with a Sino-Vietnamese couplet in verse (see figure 8):

祖德千年盛      Tổ đức thiên niên thịnh  
姑恩万代荣      Cô ân vạn đại vinh.



<Figure 7> A small shrine that is dedicated to Tianhou, the Holy Mother of the Realm, Great Grandmother, the Lady of Five Elements, and Avalokiteśvara the Land God, the God of wealth. Source: Phan Thi Hoa Ly, Date taken: 05/5/2011



<Figure 8> The painting of the Great Grandmother. Source: Phan Thi Hoa Ly, Date taken: 05/5/2011

On two sides of the tablet, there are drawing of two twisted dragons rolling around the column; their heads are facing a framing ball. This couplet can remind us of a couplet which is often found next to altars in many Kinh families in northern Vietnam:

祖宗功德千年盛  
子孝孙贤万代荣

Tổ tông công đức thiên niên thịnh  
Tử hiếu tôn hiền vạn đại vinh.

The shrine also honors the guards of these goddesses, Lord of Land, God of Wealth, and “deposited worshipped objects” (“đồ cúng gửi”). Deposited worshipped objects are sent to the temple by families who could not carry them along as they moved to a new place. Families ask people in the temple to maintain these objects because they do not want to continue to worship them, as the families believe they might bring bad luck. Many families worship this goddess to pray for good health, peace, and professional

success. But there are also some families that face bad lucks such as illness, business loss, and family break up; these people do not want to worship the goddess anymore, but they do not dare to throw their objects away for the fear of punishment. This cultural habit is very popular in southern Vietnam. Noticeably, all gods and goddesses are presented in images instead of statues. Specifically, the Tianhou goddess is presented in the image of the Jiutian Xuannu (see figure 9), while the Avalokiteśvara image is a photograph of a lady of the ethnic Kinh with an oval face, double eyelids, and a straight nose. In 2012, the shrine association replaced all of these holy images with statues as per the wishes of the deceased priest. At the most sacred place in the shrine, where the statue of the Great Grandmother is worshipped, some verses are written as follows:

The moral of the Great Grandmother is thriving for thousands of years  
The Lady's blessing is greatly glorious for millions of years.



<Figure 9> The painting of Tianhou. Source: Phan Thi Hoa Ly, Date taken: 05/5/2011

Interestingly, the shrine manager insists that the statue is the image of Lady Cổ Hỷ, a goddess of the forest in the Chăm people's beliefs. This god is widely believed to have accompanied Chăm people when they migrated from central to southern Vietnam. The Holy Mother of the Realm is also seen as a Kinhicized Chăm goddess. She used to serve as the holy mother of Chăm people in Po Narga, but through the process of co-existence, the Kinh people in central Vietnam embraced the worship of the holy mother and called her by different names such as "chúa Ngọc" (Jade Goddess), "chúa Tiên" (Fairy Goddess), "Yna," and "Thiên Y Ana." She particularly became a magical protector of women.

The Kinh people in Southern Vietnam called her the holy mother who played the role of "an owner of the land." In this case, the holy mother was seen as similar to the traditional gods of the Kinh people, as "Thành hoàng bản cảnh" (The City God of this Land) and "Lord of Land."

Both the Hoa people of Chaozhou origin and Kinh farmers worship the God of Agriculture. However, while this god in Chinese culture actually exists as a system consisting of eight gods, in Kinh culture it is embodied in the image of a people who teach others how to grow rice. Prayers are often offered to the God of Agriculture with boiled duck meat, in accordance with rituals of worshipping goddesses in southern Vietnam, as in the saying "for gods, offer chicken; for goddesses, offer duck." In this case, it seems that people identify the God of Agriculture with local goddesses such as the Mother of Rice and the Mother of Earth.

Celebrating the Tianhou goddess's birthday (Third Lunar month, 23) is the most important ritual of the shrine. The birthdays of the Lady of Five Elements (Third Lunar month, 18), the Holy Mother of the Realm (Fourth Lunar month, 24-26), Caishen (First Lunar month, 10), and other gods are also organized on the same day with that of the Tianhou goddess.

The combination of these ceremonies has been recently encouraged by the local government to reduce expenses. Members of the shrine association cook food for the ceremonies. While Avalokiteśvara is offered with vegetarian foods, other gods and

goddesses are offered trays of a variety of food such as a boiled duck, a piece of boiled pork (an alternative is roasted pig), five bowls of pork soup, five bowls of white bean soup, five plates of green bean sticky rice, five pieces of spiritual money notes, betel nuts, rice, salt, wine, and fruits. These offerings demonstrate interesting cultural aspects of the Hoa and Kinh communities.

The Hoa people's offerings include colored sticky rice, while the Kinh people use sticky rice with green beans. Pudding from the Hoa people is similar to "bánh chay" (lean cake), which has "viên" (rather flat and round) dimpled in sweet soup; people offer "bánh chay" to gods on the First Lunar month, 15 because its name, "viên," is a homonym of the word "viên mãn," which means "fullness," "perfect," and "accomplishment." Meanwhile, at the shrine, the Kinh people offer sweet sticky rice pudding to the Twelve Midwives and plain rice soup, raw rice, and salt for the wandering spirits. The presence of food for the wandering spirits seem also to be offered to the Great Grandmother. These offerings are all the food of the Kinh people.

At the altar of Guards, people offer three kinds of meats and other foods, including sweet white bean soup, pork soup, "canh kiể̃m" (vegetarian soup), "bánh bô" (sweet, chewy sponge cake), wine, and flowers. "Canh kiể̃m" is a vegetarian food of Vietnamese southerners and people believe that this food originates from a type of sweet soup called "tàu thung" of the Chaozhou people. "Tàu thung" means "bean soup," which is made from green bean, tapioca, tofu skin, and sweet potato.

As the Chaozhou immigrated into the Mekong River delta and intermarried with the Kinh people, their dish of "tàu thung" was Kinhicized. The Chaozhou people in Vietnam added more coconut milk and potato curb in the "tàu thung" and turned it into the present "canh kiể̃m."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, "bánh bô", the sweet, chewy sponge cake, also originated from southern China. It was once made of plain sugar, but when it arrived in Vietnam, people added coconut milk to it. Vietnamese people call this cake "bánh bô,"

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<sup>13</sup> See *Báo mới press* May 12, 2014 (<http://www.baomoi.com/Canh-kiem-mon-chay-Nam-Bo/84/6767926.epi>, accessed May 12/2014)

which literally means “crawling cake.” This name indicates the fermentation that forces the powder to “crawl” up to brim of the bowl.

During the Tianhou goddess’s birthday, people also performed ritual ceremonies for the founders of villages and communes at the shrine. The ritual begins at 5 pm on the twenty-second of the Third Lunar month. Food offerings include boiled pork (around 200 g), pork rice soup, pork salad, curry, fruits, and flowers. People arranged the food on a tray to be placed at the back of the shrine. After the ceremonies, the food is distributed to the worshippers. Some food also come with curry, though mainly cooked with curry powder. Vietnamese curried dishes have their own flavors. A typical curry dish in Vietnam is made of chicken (or, sometimes, pork, or duck meat), bamboo shoots, peanuts, potatoes, coconut milk, sugar, and some curry powder.

In the past, the shrine association would hire shadow puppet groups on Tianhou’s birthday because shadow puppetry is typical of Châm culture, particularly in the tradition of worshipping the Holy Mother of the Realm. Since 2008, the local government does not permit the performance of the shadow puppet dance. Budget is now spent buying more drums and gongs to “entertain the goddesses better.”<sup>14</sup>

Today, language used in the performing rituals in the shrine is done entirely in Vietnamese. The names of goddesses/gods, verses, and praying hymns are all in Vietnamese. No one knows the myths about the Tianhou goddess and there is no funeral oration for her either. Instead, the ritual master follows the format of the Kinh’s oration to worship the goddess.

From my fieldwork, I have learned that Mr. L.M.Đ is Chinese (born in 1942) and his wife is a member of the Kinh people (born in 1945). He told me that his family used to live in District 4 in Chợ Lớn. When the family business became bankrupt in 1954, his parents and their seven children moved to Phước Kiến and reclaimed land for growing rice.

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<sup>14</sup> Interview Mr L.M.Đ, May 5, 2011, at the joss-house. temple

Phước Kiến was an empty land at that time, but more people moved in. They constructed houses, and began to form a village. Nearby, there was a dilapidated temple, and people discussed the possibility of contributing money to build a new shrine, completed in 1965. At that time, as the villagers lacked money to buy statues of the goddesses, villagers wrote their names on papers in Sino-Vietnamese language and placed them on the altars. The shrine was repaired several times. Its last renovation was in 2006, and since then has been maintained well.

During this renovation, the shrine association decided to restructure the shrine. Verses and the images of festoons were drawn up by Mr. L.M.Đ. He also brought photographs of the goddesses to worship at the shrine. "I brought them from the Chinese in Chợ Lớn," he said. "I just told the sellers the names of the goddesses, and they gave me photos."<sup>15</sup> Because he could not find photographs of the goddesses' guards, he worshipped them through their names written on the signboard

The shrine association initially included around ten families, but the number was reduced to six because people have gradually left the area. Two members of the association are of Hoa origin; their family names are Luru. Families of the association take turns caring for the shrine during the year. Tasks for maintaining the shrine include cleaning and burning incense twice per day, once in the morning and in the afternoon. Members of the association have decided to place all of the statues of goddesses in one altar, combine all birthday ceremonies of goddesses into one festival, offer the same tray of food to all goddesses, worship the goddesses' guards, and replace the photographs with statues.

The worship of the Tianhou goddess at the Phước Kiến commune has mingled strongly with the beliefs of the Kinh and Chăm ethnic groups. Aspects related to a number of goddesses and gods, as well as of ritual, language, and offerings mingle with those of the Kinh and Chăm cultures. The myths of the Tianhou goddess and the traditional cultural forms associated to her seem to be fading away in places where the Chinese have co-existed with

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<sup>15</sup> Interview Mr. L.M.Đ, May 5, 2011, at the joss-house temple.

different ethnic communities.

#### IV. Conclusion

It is certain that the acculturation of the worship of the Tianhou goddess in Vietnam is complex. This cultural process follows a number of models such as assimilation, separation, restoration, and combination, and it has evolved in different contexts. The worship of the Tianhou goddess changed significantly in terms of rituals, frequency, language, the role of the ritual masters, and the architecture of the places of worship. In areas populated by the Chinese, aspects of Chinese culture attached to the worship of the Tianhou goddess remained strong. In contrast, in places where very few Chinese residents live among and mingle with other local ethnic communities, the worship of the Tianhou goddess incorporated and even assimilated into local cultural practices. That is to say, the Chinese in Vietnam have changed the worship of the Tianhou goddess in various forms by way of their co-existence with various ethnic communities. Thus, through the case-study of the worship of the Tianhou goddess, this paper insists that there has been no “peripheral fossilization” of the Chinese culture in Vietnam.

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