SUVANNABHUMI Vol. 15 No. 1 (January 2023) https://doi.org/10.22801/svn.2023.15.1.149

A Spiritual War:
Religious Responses to Marketization in Rural North Vietnam

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[*Abstract*]

This article explores religious responses to significant cultural and social change in a northern Vietnamese delta village from 1996 to 2008—the second decade after de-collectivization. Drawing upon extensive fieldwork in both the village and surrounding religious networks, the article teases out the meanings of the new religious movements for northern rural people in the new era of market economy; the symbols, language, and metaphoric resources people used in response to their uncertainty and mistrust of the new social landscape; and the unintended consequences of rapid societal development such as marginalization, tensions, and social disintegration. The article argues that as in milleniarism elsewhere, new religious movements in northern rural Vietnam embody unorthodox syncretism between world religious and local traditions, thus linking past, present, and

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The author is very grateful to Bac Dong people in Ha Nam province who shared their life stories and perspectives on social transition in contemporary Vietnam and to Philip Taylor, Kirsten Endres, Chung Van Hoang and two annonymous reviewers for helpful comments on drafts of this article. This essay is drawn from her PhD research that was funded by the Harvard-Yenching Institute and the Anthropology Department of the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University.

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future. However, when drawing upon a common reservoir of memories and experiences to cope with risks and challenges of the new market world, local people not only drew on the power and imperial metaphor of deities in their traditional religion and belief, but became more creative to recuperate meanings, standards, and symbols from revolutionary discourse to reorient themselves, and overcome alienation and marginalization.

Keywords: new religious movement, millenarianism, religious responses, marketization, rural north delta Vietnam

Ⅰ. Introduction

Born in Bac Dong[1] village right after the 1945 Revolution, Mrs. Đức spent some years in her youth as a worker at a socialist workplace in Hoa Binh province during early 1960s. After she returned home, she became a member of the local agricultural co-operative and later a staff member at the co-operative store. Ten years after the Renovation, when most villagers started to increase their involvement in the market economy to improve their life, she was a poor widow in the village. Her income derived mainly from cultivating her 360m^2 plot of allocated rice land and selling vegetables at the village market. Her only daughter married and lived in the same village but could not afford to help her because she was poor as well. In 1996, when she turned 50 years old, Đức suddenly became ill. She seemed unable to function normally and what she said made no sense. Đức would often walk around the house, clapping her hands and saying, "I am an immortal being living in this human world." She tried several things to return to normal. When nothing else helped, one of her friends suggested her to consider contracting a ritual at the temple of an 80-year-old woman in the nearby district of Ha Tay province[2] at a cost of only two hundred thousand đồng (about 16 USD). The name of the

[1] Bac Dong is not the official name of the village; it is one version of the revolutionary name of the village during the collectivization period. Names of people and places in this article have been changed for purposes of confidentiality.

[2] Now a part of the City of Hanoi.

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temple was "The Gate of Heaven" [Cổng Trời]. When Đức arrived, she failed to see any Heaven's Gate that matched the picture in her imagination. Nevertheless, she was quickly convinced by what she found at the temple and decided to hold a ritual. The very next day, Đức was able to go to work in the rice fields. When I met her in 2008, everything was still going well with her. Every year, she visited the temple once or twice to pray or perform rituals.

Đức said what helped her overcome doubts and prejudice about the simplicity of the ritual was the nature of the master at the Gate of Heaven temple. She was first impressed by the fact that the master was a former senior communist party member who had participated in the revolutionary cause since its beginnings in the 1940s. Beside practicing the Mother Goddess religion in the simplest and most austere way, the master believed that she was given magical powers by the heavens to fight a spiritual war caused by a gang of spirits of Yin enemies[3] in the contemporary society. If people follow her call, follow the guidelines of Uncle Hồ and revolution, she would be able to defeat the enemy and establish new life.

Đức's story is one of several examples in Bac Dong that helps to explain how the re-enchantment with religion has occurred in this community. It is also reflective of a wider phenomenon in contemporary Vietnam that many researchers have already investigated (Fjelstad and Nguyen 2006; Pham 2007; Taylor 2007). More importantly, the network of mediums that Đức chose to join is one among a few new religious movements in the region that emerged during the course of this research in a village of the southern Red River Delta. However, her story still poses some questions: What were the problems she faced? What is the link between the emergence of new social relations and cultural standards in Vietnam's increasingly marketized society following the decade-long shift from collectivization to market economy and her response of following that religious worshipping group? Is it valid to

[3] In the Vietnamese perspective, the universe is divided between the world of human beings and the world of spirit entities. In the world of spirit entities, the heavenly realm (cõi Thiên) covers and governs Buddha's realm (cõi Phật), the Yin realm (cõi Âm) and the earthly realm (cõi Trần) (Hoang 2017: 94).

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use millenarianism to understand the new religious phenomena that Đức practices or are those phenomena more closely related to creativity in religious ideology and practice during this period of Vietnamese economic reform?

Researchers have noted religious responses of people to marketization elsewhere in the world. Studies of post-socialism have illustrated that as a result of market reform, people in socialist bloc countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia had to face the issues of privatization of land, engagement in market activity, consumption, and ideas about property and ownership (Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Ruth and Humphrey 2002; Verdery 1996). As a sense of anxiety, fear and panic mounted, fuelled by events that did not necessarily make sense to people, shamanic practices seemed to offer an explanation for poverty and other misfortunes in these societies (Buyandelgeriyn 2007: 130). The ways that people in the former socialist countries responded to social change accords with findings elsewhere that religion, shamanism, and spirit possession are ways for people to find meaning and identity and to overcome the uncertainties resulting from the expansion of the market economy (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, 1999; Kendall 1996; Stengs 2009; Weller 2000; Salemink 2003).

In the case of Vietnam, many studies have described the social instability after the liberal market economy was introduced and the country embarked on an era of development and modernization. Problems ranged from a widening gender gap placing heavier burdens on women (Luong 2003a; Nguyen Vo 2008; Werner 2002) to the problem of social inequality between different groups, regions, and ethnicities (Kerkvliet 1995; Luong 2003b; Taylor 2004b).

What makes the case of Vietnam compelling is that economic reform has coincided with a gradual but profound return to traditional rituals and various cults. Researchers have explored the revival of family, patrilineage, and village rituals against a backdrop of increasing wealth, as well as attempts by local villagers to regain autonomy, together with efforts of the state to mitigate the undesirable side effects of the transformation (Luong 1993; Malarney 1993; Kleinen 1999; Endres 1999). Alongside the intensification of

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the market economy, the re-emergence of religious activities has recently transitioned from village-based rituals to Mother Goddess and heroic cults as symbolic expressions of the new social relations within the market economy. Research on the increase in mediumship describes religion as a response to existential concerns such as illness, death, fear, emotional distress, and misfortune (Endres 2006; Nguyen 2007; Salemink 2003) or as a way of articulating differences of status, gender, generation, or ethnicity which persist despite, or perhaps because of, the state's policies (Norton 2006; Pham 2007; Taylor 2004a, 2007). However, very few have examined the responses of rural people to the emergence of new social relations and cultural standards in Vietnam's increasingly marketized, globalized society, and the meanings of the new religious movements to northern rural people in the new era of market economy.

In a recent study of new religious movements in northern Vietnam after Renovation, Hoang (2017) explores the rise of new religious groups though the experience of modernity, by which "post-1986 new religious groups" are seen as having emerged in a context of social differentiation, representing conflict with socialist modernity and secularity. Some groups, such as the School of Teaching Goodness, reimagine past knowledge and indigenous folk belief for the purpose of accommodating the present situation. Other movements based on the belief that the Jade Buddha would bring salvation to the nation, demonstrate the ongoing millenarian dream of social transformation in the context of challenges bought about by Vietnam's growing integration into the world economy. Despite the author's analysis of the emergence, organization, doctrines, rituals, and practices of these groups, actual social context or the detailed disagreements of the new movement's followers have not been described clearly.

This research applies the ideas of religious response to social change to explore the meanings of new religious movements to north delta Vietnam's rural people in the new era of market economy. By considering examples of religious networks in which people participated, such as "Universal Central School" temple and the Gate of Heaven temple, the article aims to understand the

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symbols, language, and metaphoric resources people use in response to their situation of uncertainty, anxiety, and mistrust. It also tries to explore the dynamics of transformative dialogue between the state and local people in the recent emergence of the spiritual life. This will be accomplished by applying the concept of millenarianism to explore new religious phenomena in the study.

Millenarianism is a variant of millennialism, a term which "originally referred to the Christian belief that after Christ's second coming a messianic kingdom will be created on earth in which he would reign with the help of a group of "chosen" for a thousand years until the final judgment" (Villa-Flores 2007: 242). This concept has been extended by anthropologists, sociologists, and historians to include religious movements that expect a total, imminent, collective, and this-worldly redemption (Lindstrom 1996: 561; Villa-Flores 2007: 242-243). According to Lee (1996), while millennialism is used to refer to the biblical idea of the millennium, with its ancient hopes and beliefs, millenarianism's emphasis is more on how society influences a person's millennial view, or social aspects of what have become known as millenarian movements.

Millenarians often await the destruction of the existing social order, and believe in, expect, and/or prepare for the coming of a new utopian world (Hobsbawn 1965). The movement is usually led by a charismatic savior or prophet who has a connection with divine beings and possesses supernatural power. Millennial beliefs have arisen in many parts of the world, taking in a variety of contents and forms in accordance with the aspirations and specific cultural backgrounds of their seekers (Villa-Flores 2007: 243). These can be grouped into three main types, depending on the nature of their activities. The first is the so-called cargo cults, which have occurred in Melanesia and elsewhere in the world. In this kind of cult, millenarians follow their prophetic leaders in conducting sophisticated rituals to hasten the arrival of an abundance of material goods by ship. The second type is peasant millenarianism where farmers organize themselves around a prophetic/charismatic leader and engage in armed struggle or revolt against political authorities. And the third type is less militant and more religious than the mix between Christianity and traditional religion or

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Buddhism and traditional religion (Mile 2010: 646).

Most millenarian movements share the common origin of being reactions to situations of accelerated change, deprivation, and social unrest. The cults tend to arise in moments of crisis, when societies are undergoing periods of accelerated cultural, political, and economic change (Villa-Flores 2007: 243). Before World War II, many of these movements emerged from the profound transformations brought about by colonialism. Post-war, they typically responded to an expanding global economic system that promised development and modernization (Lindstrom 1996: 562). Given that modernity produces disparity, exclusion, and marginalization, millenarian movements are defined as attempts by marginalized or excluded people to create a unifying identity and exclusive space against the invasion of modern institutions and authorities (Mile 2010: 647).

Millenarian cults that emerged in Vietnam share the common characteristics of millenarianism elsewhere. Hoa Hao Buddhism in Southern Vietnam was a typical peasant millenarianism, which can be seen as a response to ecological and social crisis; an attempt to overcome social disintegration and a cultural crisis in a frontier society, by positing the restoration of a golden age and imagining a messiah returning from the colonial period (Ho Tai 1983). The 1986 economic reform in northern Vietnam spawned around a hundred new religious movements, many of which have millennial ideas and share common origins with the third type of millenarianism: the mix between the world religions and traditional religion. Followers of those movements are described as members of highly vulnerable social groups who have failed in the market economy and struggle to cope with the challenges of modernity (Đỗ Quang Hưng 2001; Hoang 2017).

This article, however, will argue that beside sharing common characteristics of millenarianism in other regions, new regious movements with millenarian attributes that emerged in northern rural Vietnam after the 1986 Renovation have distinctive characteristics. These movements represent an unorthodox syncretism between Buddhism and local traditions like Mother

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Goddess and ancestral worship, linking past, present, and future. Local people have drawn upon memories and experiences from the past to cope with risks and challenges of the new market world. Nevertheless, in many cases, northern rural Vietnamese people not only draw on the power and imperial metaphor of deities in their traditional religion and beliefs, but also try to recuperate meanings, standards, and symbols from revolutionary discourse to reorient themselves and overcome their alienation and marginalization.

The article draws upon long-term ethnographic research in a village in the Red River Delta from July 2007 to May 2008, which aimed to explore the proliferation of new forms of religiously imagined community in rural Vietnam linked to the transition to the market economy. By employing the typical anthropological methods of interviewing and participant observation, the researcher not only participated in the daily activities and social networks of villagers, but also went on pilgrimages with people to different Northern provinces, participated in their social networks in surrounding locations, and talked to some outsiders who might influence village life.

Ⅱ. Background

By 2008, Bac Dong is a rice-growing village of 1036 households and 4297 people in Ha Nam province. Located in a marshy area of the delta where the soil is poor, and water flooded the rice fields for half of each year, the Bac Dong people struggled for long to make a living there. Before the 1945 Revolution, besides cultivating one rice crop each year, local people had to develop specialized skills in order to survive, such as digging under water to build house foundations in muddy soil, building dikes and other hydraulic constructions, weaving tussore silk, engaging in aquaculture in order to earn a meager income. Working day and night, people barely maintained basic subsistence.

Amidst such difficult circumstances, villagers very early on constructed a temple and a communal house, or *đình*, for worship of Đinh Bộ Lĩnh, one of the famous kings in the feudal dynasties of

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Vietnam. He functions as the village guardian spirit who provides moral support for families in the community. The *đình* was also considered a male-centric site in which the power of traditional village authorities was concentrated. Like other communities in the delta, Bac Dong also has a pagoda (*chùa*) with a main building dedicated to Buddha and a Mother Goddess shrine (*nhà Mẫu*) in behind it dedicated to the deities of the Cult of Four Palaces. This site mainly serves as a place for elderly women to conduct bimonthly prayer sessions and various ceremonies to pray for the wellbeing of their families and the souls of the deceased villagers. Women gathering in this space are provided the opportunity for socialization and companionship. Additionally, two small shrines (*miếu*) at the edges of the village commemorate the two Ladies of Dinh Tien Hoang King.[4] Here, female villagers can interact with deities to deal with the difficulties of life. Villagers believe that, together with Buddha, village gods and other spiritual beings, family and kinship ancestors are primary key forces protecting and supporting them in daily life. Most families in the village have their own lineage halls to honor the cult of ancestors. These types of religious sites have served the institutional needs of the whole village of Bac Dong, as well as those in other northern Vietnamese villages since the old days (Luong 1992; Kleinen 1999).

During the past century, the village of Bac Dong has experienced successive significant changes. In 1954, after a century of colonial rule and nine years of war against the French, villagers were mobilized in land reforms which overturned the landlord class and former authorities and placed those formerly dispossessed at the top (Malarney 2002). Only two years after that turbulent reform period, together with other villages in the delta, Bac Dong entered

[4] These were two Mường ethnic women who supported the Đinh King to gain independence. The legend about them says that these two ladies had magical power and some Bac Dong people believed that they were spirits who came to help the king. Thanks to their meritorious service to the king, these two ladies underwent a transformation in the perspective of villagers from being outsiders and strangers to being given a title and being worshipped in the village. However, long before they were simply worshiped at two small stone outdoor shrines at two edges of the village. Recently, villagers contributed money and labor to build them larger indoor shrines.

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a process of agricultural collectivisation that lasted from 1960 to 1986. By contributing the means of agricultural production—land and draft animals—and becoming cooperative members, villagers became liable for obligations of selling surplus agricultural products for the state and labor recruitment, but also eligible for income and social welfare benefits (Luong 2010; Kleinen 1999). The villagers remember collectivization as a time of chronic hunger, but one that was rich in social solidarity. People were discontented with the poor governance and the problems with the centrally-planned economy which caused a continual decrease in their income from the cooperative, as well as the policy of household book and migration management that restricted them from moving out of the community. However, except for some level of disparity between "policy families" (mostly families of war-martyrs and wounded soldiers), local cadres and ordinary people on rice and food priority, there was a shared situation of need among villagers. Family members and villagers worked and stuck together through thick and thin. In these conditions where access to popular media and entertainment equipment was lacking, the creation and performance of popular artistic culture flourished. Social organizations like women's associations, youth unions and children's unions played an active role in the community and helped to keep all members connected.

De-collectivization was implemented in 1981 through the Land Law and Resolution 10 in 1988, which allocated agricultural land to households for the long term. Agricultural production in Bac Dong increased significantly and people were provided the chance to enter a real market economy. The dynamics, opportunities, and challenges associated with marketization and globalization transformed the village. Since the early 1990s, migration of villagers has intensified. Hundreds of Bac Dong residents moved to Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and other provinces to work as hired laborers in factories, on construction sites, at woodcraft enterprises, or as petty traders and street vendors. In the 2000s, approximately 50 young villagers migrated to Malaysia, Korea, and some European countries to work as export laborers. Villagers who stayed at home based their living on cultivating their allocated rice land, combined with trading or

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finding wage labor in the region. Through migration and doing business in the outside world, the residents of Bac Dong developed various new enterprises ranging from weaving scarves and brocade bags to producing and selling picture frames to the people in their village which created a dizzying pace of change for this community. By 1995, all villagers had enough rice for home consumption and they were able to start saving for building houses and growing their assets. Along with that economic improvement, however, villagers began to witness dramatic social changes in their community.

After de-collectivization, each household was given back its autonomy to promote its own economic interests, but villagers were faced with an unsettling feeling that no one cared for them anymore. Where previously they had been subsidized by the state for different levels of school, healthcare, food, and household necessities, people now needed to pay for all these. As local cadres were no longer responsible for the life of villagers, everyone now was responsible for themselves and their families first. Moreover, many Bac Dong people felt that their education and skills were not enough to get them jobs or earn social status in modern society. 60-year-old Mr. Xuan described the new conditions: “The only thing we can have nowadays is a paper from the local government which certifies that we are normal citizens, eligible to register for a temporary stay when going out of the village to find work.” “Being peasants today means we have to work hard. Due to the lack of jobs, we have to go far away, work in bad conditions and accept risks to earn a living,”, Mr. Phong, a 55-year-old villager lamented.

In general, most villagers felt that in the modernized society, their material life had improved but at the cost of greater physical and spiritual hardship. In the market economy, only healthy active people can earn good money by being employed or by doing business. Women often stay at home to work and care for their families. Young females (under 35 years old) can take on cleaner forms of light work, like making brocade bags or sewing clothes for workshops in the village. However, these jobs can be quite challenging as they require the worker to be handy and quick-witted. Some women feel pressured by their husbands and families as income from their jobs is lower than that of others.

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Women in the village who are 40 or 50 years old are more willing to do more basic and dirty work such as collecting, sorting, and trading recycled materials like duck feathers or scrap iron to cover daily expenses. Elderly people feel they are the most marginalized when they must rely on their children to help them cultivate their 360m^2 plot of allocated paddy land[5] to grow rice for consumption and generate some money for daily expenditures. As not all villagers have enough income to support their aging parents, in many cases the old people still have to produce items for craft workshops in the village for little payment or limit their expenses to the lowest level.

The other serious problem people faced after Reform is social differentiation and disorientation. From the situation of "equally poor" during the collectivization period, since 1996, social differentiation in the village has been increasing. In 2008, 30% of households had become well-off while most villagers lived at subsistence levels and about 10% of households were categorized as poor. There had been a significant rise in individualistic economic competition in the village. At that time, while some rich families could accumulate about 20 billion VND [1 million USD], one hired laborer or petty trader could earn only 50-100 thousand VND a day [2-5 USD]—essentially, subsistence living. Such income inequality left most villagers feeling nervous and more focused on earning a livelihood than caring for each other. Many tried their luck in business but not everyone could be successful, and those who were not might be looked down upon by their neighbors for their failure. To be poor become a shameful thing for people, and it was hard for those who with low self-esteem to gain acceptance in the village. Moreover, many villagers were surprised when rich people, lucky but living immoral lives, were praised while honest people were ignored because of the new value placed on "how much money you have." The phenomena of families breaking apart, children engaging in social evils and men having affairs also increased as people chased money and consumed more. Many people, especially

[5] In 1993, each household member in the village was allocated 360m^2 of rice land. Most of the elderly in Bac Dong, after dividing residential and agricultural land among their children, live separately and only keep their own allocated 360m^2 of paddy land.

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women, felt lonely because their husbands and children moved away from home for work. Some say that there is no other way but for the family to gather only once a year, during the New Year celebration. Village residents no longer felt togetherness as it was hard to organize a shared activity when everyone focused on taking care of their families. Furthermore, people complained a lot about various fees and duties they were required to pay, along with widespread corruption in land management, and administration among local authorities. All these issues have left many villagers confused about cultural and moral standards in contemporary society. In talking about modern social life, villagers often spoke nostalgically about the "Uncle Ho time" (*thời Bác Hồ*) in the 1960s in words such as: "In Uncle Ho times, it was fair and serious. At that time, we received kilograms of sugar or a whole fish each; now we do not get anything. We need to spend money if we want to do things."

In this context, the spiritual life in the village became more meaningful than ever. After 2000, the people of Bac Dong embraced the ritual revival movement which has been widely popular in the delta after Doi Moi (Luong 1992; Kleinen 1999; Malarney 1993). As part of the village spirit cult, the communal house was renovated and the festival was revived in 2006. At the pagoda, about half of the women in the village joined the Association of the Elderly Women (*Hội các già/các vãi*) and the team of "incense followers[6] (*con hương/con nhang*) to conduct monthly rituals to pray for the wellbeing of their families. At home, many families invited priests or mediums to hold a "bad luck relief" ritual (*lễ giải hạn*) at the beginning or the end of the year. Beside those traditional village

[6] This relates to the practice of "carrying an incense holder on one's head" (*đội bát nhang*). The Vietnamese believe that spirits of the Three Palace (*Tam Phủ*) or Four Palace religion often choose followers for themselves. Thus, each person's fate is related to one or several deities. When the spirit feels unhappy about his/her followers, he/she can make them sick or conjure up troubles. Thus when villagers learn from fortuntellers or other divine sources that the spirits are upset with them, they will hold a *đội bát nhang* ritual to ensure everything will go well. After the ritual, those involved become the children of the god and have an obligation to follow the religion's important annual rituals, although these obligations are less stringent than those of a medium.

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religious ceremonies, after 2000, many Bac Dong villagers also sought spiritual sites beyond their village and religious specialists who had emerged in the surrounding villages after Renovation. Most of these spiritual experts are mediums of the Mother Goddess religion, priests, and fortunetellers. Depending on their personal preference and situation, Bac Dong villagers contacted or followed different masters. Those doing business or having family members migrating far away often join the translocal spirit mediumship networks to access the power of the Mother Goddess deities who were supposed to support people in coping with the risks and uncertainties of the modern economy (Pham 2009: 144). Middle-age and older women tend to follow master mediums of new religious groups who care more about health issues and the wellbeing of their families. These groups often conduct monthly rituals at their private temples and make pilgrimages to famous Mother Goddess temples and pagodas in northern Vietnam.

Given that, as some villagers described, performing rituals have become a new social movement as the dynamics of the spiritual life also created conflict, tension and heated discussion among villagers about the qualifications and material benefits of various religious specialists. In the village, there was a conflict at the pagoda when it was felt that the former nun there was too old and her successor did not have sufficient qualifications. Some mediums in the village also sought to be leaders of incense followers to take over the power and benefit at the pagoda. Some of the master mediums in surrounding villages were criticized for seeking benefits, while others were evaluated as lacking qualifications. Together with the economic tension and confused moral standards in the community, this frustrated people, and thus searched for alternative forms of religion.

Ⅲ. Bac Dong People and the Practice of New Religious Movements in the Region

3.1. The Universal Central School

Like the new medium movement in Hanoi during the late 2000s, the number of Bac Dong villagers following this religious practice has

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also increased. By 2008, almost ten villagers had become mediums. Once, when I attended a performance of a medium at Bac Dong pagoda, a woman sitting beside me named Dinh whispered to me: "I think this form of the Mother Goddess ritual is very luxurious and wasteful. I followed a new way of rituals in a temple in the region which are much simpler and more economical. It is like a cult of Uncle Hồ."

The temple Dinh referred to was five kilometers away from Bac Dong. It was built on a range of limestone mountains surrounded by a lake and was tended by a 72-year-old lady, Mrs. Sợi, who was from the village of Ha Tay province (now part of Hanoi) about ten kilometers away. As the local village had several temples and pagodas, Sợi and other religious specialists from outside were invited to take care of them. Sợi used to be a poor illiterate woman who had to to sell crabs caught in the rice fields to raise her eight children. In the mid 1980s, there was gossip all over the Red River Delta about people finding images of human beings on many crab shells. At that time, Sợi suddenly emerged as a representative of spirits. She was supposed to have been given a spiritual flag. As her profile grew, many elderly people in the village began to listen to her teachings. At that time, her actions were considered superstitious and reactionary and she was questioned by the local government. At the end of the 1980s, Sợi came to the temple near Bac Dong to establish her religious practice. Even though the temple was dedicated to Mother Goddess Âu Cơ, Sợi renamed the temple *Trường thi vũ trụ cột cờ* ("the Universal Central School for Competition where the Spirit pitches the Flag"). She envisioned that this temple would be a school of heaven where people from the surrounding area could gather to grow in morality (*đức*), meritorious work (*công*), and reputation/dignity (*danh giá, nhân phẩm*). Sợi called her religion millennialism (*thiên niên kỷ luận*). Her followers called her mother (*mẹ*) while ordinary people just called her Lady. The main concept of this religion was that after 2001 the world would no longer be led by Sakyamuni Buddha (*phật Thích Ca*). Instead, Mitreya Buddha (*phật Di Lặc*) would take over this role, and the Jade Buddha Ho Chi Minh would now rule the universe. Uncle Hồ had been endowed with the title Jade Buddha

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because he was a person of great merit when alive and after his death entered the Heavenly Palace (Hoang 2016: 242). The religious concept was that the universe—the world of life and human life—is located between heaven and earth. According to this religion, in the final millennium, the King of Demons (*quỷ vương*) will have to serve Saints (*thánh vương*) and build a road to please the God. During this present time, the Demon King would harass the people and possess many people, causing them to do bad things.

Sợi practiced her religion by making vows, treating illnesses with magical power, and fortunetelling using eggs. At the temple, several old women who were deemed to have been given magical power by the spirits helped Sợi to treat her sick followers by using incense-steam and special massages. Followers often collected water at the temple and brought it home to drink. They believed it to be the water of an immortal (*nước Tiên*). Sợi often traveled around the region to hold rituals and treat the illnesses of her followers in their homes. Prior to the 14th and 30th of each month in the lunar calendar, dates most valued in the Buddhist calendar, she held rituals in the temples. On those days, followers from surrounding villages gathered to worship the spirit and share a very simple meal. Normally, less than a hundred people visited the temples on those days. On important annual occasions, several hundred followers might attend the ceremonies. Visitors often brought simple offerings like fruits, cakes, and flowers to the temple. As the religion criticized superstition, the overuse of votive paper and the wastage of offerings,[7] Sợi recommended that her followers spend actual money (*tiền đen*) more on building the temple and less on practical donations. As most of her followers were poor laborers, they were willing to contribute their time to work on all the affairs of the temple. They were taught to be kind and attentive to one another. Thus, during rituals, or when donating labor and sharing meals, the atmosphere was warm and close-knit.

Sợi's rituals focused on sharing teachings with the followers

[7] This is a similar attitude to what is found in other new religious phenomenon such as the Peace Society of Heavenly Mediums (*Đoàn Đồng thiên Hoà Bình*) in Hai Duong province, which is the deification of Ho Chi Minh. One of critiques of this new religion is the overuse of paper and votive objects (Hoang 2017: 94).

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rather than worshipping. After food trays were offered to the spirits, Sợi conducted several *kowtow* and then provided teachings. Her followers reported that each time the topics were different, depending on what the spirits wanted her to talk about. Sợi often emphasized that the world was in troubled times. There were too many deceitful people (about 70%) according to her. Thus, she begged the heavenly spirits to judge and implement justice like the revolutionaries had done before, to help those who were poor and honest to have a better life. According to her, the dishonest, superstitious, and imperious who have a contemptuous attitude should be suppressed. She affirmed that her religion calls on heaven's magical power but follows the revolutionary policy, that is, its spiritual basis is secular belief rather than superstition.

Her teaching was quite abstract and hard to understand for many participants at the ritual. Most adherents recognized that their practice was part of a new religion comprising of a cult of Buddha, the Holy, and the ancestors, but in a modest way. Their master was a good poor woman who taught them to live honest and moral lives. Many followers reported that they changed their lives after following the rituals at the temple. They gave away any surplus money to needy people, did not lie to others and tried to be kind to everyone. Only some could understand the deeper meanings of the religion.

Followers of Sợi's spiritual practice often met with opposition from their families. Many husbands considered it an indecent religion and forbade their wives to follow it. In Bac Dong, more than 10 women who went to the temple were poor. Even though their neighbors did not comment about their religion, some villagers showed an unsympathetic attitude to it; they considered it unorthodox (*không chính thống*). This meant that the master had to rely on the ancient Mother Goddess temple and the local people's belief in its efficacy to practice her religion—millenarianism. In her religious practice, she tried to raise the voice of the poor, make a claim for their equality, and oppose negative social factors that might cause them harm. However, in the current climate, it is difficult for the master and her poor followers to compete with the more popular sense that "wealth gives birth to rituals," as well as to challenge the large proportion of the population which has benefited

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greatly from social transition. Her ideology and practice were also considered a negative view[8] that some local people were hesitant to follow. However, this ritual practice gave Dinh and her fellow believers a moral standard from which to deal with the issues of marginalization, social tensions, and atomization in the new social landscape.

3.2. The Gate of Heaven Temple

In 2006, when the author was carrying out research on mediumship in Hanoi, a rumor circulated that there was an elderly woman in Ha Tay province who would hold an initiation ceremony for mediums which cost only five hundred thousand *đồng*. Many masters and mediums in the city laughed at this, given the fact that they often spent at least eight million *đồng*, at that time, to hold such a ritual (Endres and Nguyễn 2006).

After some months in Bac Dong, in 2008, through the story of Mrs. Đức, the author came to visit the Gate of Heaven where, as it turned out, the master was the rumored old woman. She was still active and healthy at the age of 90. After joining the revolution in the 1940s, she went on to live an ordinary life in the village and took no interest in local government. In the mid-1980s, she became ill and confined herself to a room on the second floor of her home without eating anything. Her children were worried that she might die. She would open the window several times daily to inform people that she was still alive. After one month, she threw pieces of paper which carried statements and predictions from Heaven out of the window. They related how she used to be a daughter of the Heaven King who had once dropped a valuable glass and was punished by being sent to this world. In the 1980s, Heavenly Jade Emperor gave her the task of watching over the heavenly gate and saving the people. At first, the neighbors did not believe her story, but she convinced people by demonstrating strange phenomena. For instance, an incense-bowl that could not be lit caught fire by itself when the spirit responded to her prayer.

[8] On the view of political security of the state, many new religions reveal their negative view of politics by venerating uncle Hồ as a Buddha in order to critique contemporary society (Đỗ Quang Hưng 2001: 12)

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Some elderly women in her village were the first followers to listen to her prophetic words and wrote down her poems, songs, and prayers. They even took Heaven's prophetic words on the country's prosperity, as interpreted by Đức, to the state leaders in Hanoi. Since then, people have called her the incarnation of the Immortal (*Tiên Hóa*). She no longer eats solid food; instead, she drinks only coconut milk and orange juice. In the 1990s, after some years of offering prayers for local elderly women, Tiên Hóa began to practice her religion. She affirmed that she followed Buddhism, a world religion, and the cult of the Mother Goddess, a traditional belief of the country. However, influenced by millennial ideology, Tiên Hóa believed that Heaven has now taken over the role of ruling the world. Therefore, according to her, people should believe and follow Heaven to be given protection and support. She recommended that all her followers register to become children of the Vương[9] family in Heaven. Only in that way could people and their ancestors be protected from any upset in the world and be happy all their lives. In the temple's records and in written petitions to the gods, all the followers' family names were changed to Vương. Instead of using the standard form of petitions widely used in Buddhism and the Cult of the Mother Goddess, Tiên Hóa used her own type of petition for rituals; this allowed her to perform the whole process since she claimed to have magical power and could recite prayers and plead for the spirit to give blessed gifts and support to her followers.

There was no statue of Buddha or the spirits of the Mother Goddess at the temple. Tiên Hóa just set up a large altar right in front of a red curtain as a place to celebrate the ceremony. Followers could easily imagine that the red curtain represented a border line between heaven and earth. Most visitors came to the temple to take part in an initiation ceremony that would establish them as mediums able to perform annual rituals. Some of them combined these rites with other popular rituals of the Mother Goddess religion like relieving bad luck (*lễ giải hạn*), repaying debts

[9] In Vietnamese, '*Vương*' has the same meaning as '*Vua*' (the King). In this context, Mrs. Tiên Hóa might have meant that all of her followers should become children of the Heaven King.

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to spirits (*trả nợ tào quan*), or breaking off relationships with people in the other world (*cắt người âm theo*). In 2009, about thirty people per day performed Lên Đồng rituals at the temple. Each month approximately one hundred new followers held an initiation ceremony. In comparison, on average, a famous master in Hanoi could hold this kind of ritual for about twenty to fifty new followers a year. Thus, Tiên Hóa might be considered the master medium in northern Vietnam "giving birth" to the most children of the Cult of Four Palaces, despite the lack of recognition of her and her followers as mediums by many of her peers.

<Photo 1> The altar table of the Gate of Heaven Temple, and a Lên Đồng ritual of Tiên Hóa (the old lady in the red costume) in February 8th 2020 (Source:https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dB3LZ_v7slM; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2PgSN9hqnU, Accessed November 15, 2022)

Fundamentally, Tiên Hóa organized rituals according to the etiquette of the Mother Goddess religion but in a very simplified form. After her assistants addressed spirits with a petition of her own, Tiên Hóa uncovered two bowls of water[10] and quickly performed some important sequences of mandarins, ladies, and princes. She wore the same clothes throughout the sequences and all her movements took place in less than thirty minutes. Then Tiên

[10] In the initiation ritual of mediums in Hanoi, the master often uncovers four bowls of water which represent four palaces: Heaven, Earth, Water and Mountain. In this case, the author had no chance to ask Tiên Hóa what her two bowls signified, given that it is difficult to access her. Her assistants did not want anyone to disturb her. Moreover, Tiên Hóa prefers to talk about what she wants to rather than letting people question her, or doing something like an interview.

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Hóa covered her followers with a red veil[11] and invited them to start performing. While an ordinary medium had to spend up to ten million *đồng* for clothes, headscarf, and jewelry, at the Heaven's Gate temple people just needed one red dress and one red veil to perform their whole ritual. The temple lent followers any small and necessary equipment they needed. It was a collective performance, as normally 15 people took part at the same time. 15 elderly women from the village acted as assistants for each medium. Mediums performed the same movements following live music. Offerings were prepared for each sequence to give blessed gifts from the spirits to the surrounding people in a manner like other contemporary mediumship rituals. However, the quality and quantity of gifts were much smaller and simpler. Organizing the ritual in this way was more economical in terms of time and money.

<Photo 2> A collective initiation ceremony at the Gate of Heaven Temple in 2020 (Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dB3LZ_v7slM, Accessed November 15, 2022)

After the initiation ceremony at the temple, followers of Heaven's Gate could practice as mediums and perform Lên Đồng rituals in any temple of the Mother Goddess religion. However, most

[11] The red veil (*khăn phủ điện*) is used to mark the spirits' descent and ascent during a Lên Đồng ritual.

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of them confined themselves to conducting rituals at the Gate of Heaven temple. Very few followed the fashion of contemporary mediumship in buying costumes for each sequence of a performance, performing at famous temples or giving a lot of money and expensive offerings during rituals. At a time when mediumship was flourishing, a person's difficulties or even success was explained in terms of fate and destined aptitude. Followers of Tiên Hóa came to her to solve their problems through Lên Đồng, a treatment that seems to have become popular nowadays. However, Tiên Hóa could meet their demand without the negative aspects of the new social and religious movement (Endres and Nguyễn 2006). Many of her followers found it hard to understand why she was not very interested in performing or talking about rituals. Most of her ritual affairs were carried out by assistants. Tiên Hóa only joined people at the beginning and the end of the ritual when they sang her songs. In her interactions with people, she liked to talk about herself and her ideology. The simplified mediumship that she practiced can be considered as her tool to help people resolve their concerns and to attract followers. Beyond that, Tiên Hóa wanted to transmit her new religion and ideology to the whole society.

Unlike Mrs. Sợi, Tiên Hóa did not emphasize the role of Jade Buddha Ho Chi Minh in Heaven, but she liked to follow Uncle Hồ's modest lifestyle and guidelines. She often wore a white shirt similar to the clothes of former revolutionary cadres. Only when performing rituals would Tiên Hóa wear a yellow long dress over it. In keeping with revolutionary austerity guidelines, Tiên Hóa tried to reduce as much as possible the cost for rituals and contributions. The donations followers gave for rituals were mostly spent on food and offerings, and helped support 20 of the elderly women in the village who served as assistants every day. She discouraged contributions from poor followers for the temple. Moreover, she used money donated to the temple to build a part of the village road. Tiên Hóa seemed more compassionate toward poor followers than rich ones. Every day, the temple assistants prepared about 10 trays of food to offer to the spirits. At noon time, all the visitors and followers would share this simple food in a unified and harmonious atmosphere. Everyone served themselves during the meal and washed their

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dishes afterwards; all were treated equally.

In her petition sheets for spirits, poems, songs and talks, Tiên Hóa stated that 13 years previously Heaven had given her magical power to control wind and rain (*úp gió thu mưa*). This enabled her to save some of the surrounding provinces from disasters. The Council of Heaven had held four meetings in recent years to issue resolutions giving her power. She had even been given a spiritual sword. When the country or the region was in danger, she used this sword to work miracles to protect them. For example, in 2007, when northern Vietnam suffered the coldest winter in decades, Tiên Hóa lit a fire on her rooftop altar and used her magic sword to dispel the cold. She believed that there was a gang of evil spirits or Yin enemies (*yêu quái*, *giặc âm*) who wanted to occupy this world. They had no compassion for the world's people; instead, they wanted to have full power to upset this world. Tiên Hóa had fought two battles against them on one night. She won both, but the spirits still attempted to come back. Therefore, Tiên Hóa called everybody in the society to support her by singing four songs that she had composed to make the spirits frightened of the strength of the world's people and withdraw. According to the content and ideology of these songs, there had recently been a spiritual war (*chiến tranh tâm linh*).[12] With its traditional spirit of fortitude, originating from Hùng King, Trần Hưng Đạo to the Hồ Chí Minh period, Vietnam had shown its talent and ability. Tiên Hóa felt that people should unite in unison with her to suppress the fiendish gang of spirits. In order to do so, it was necessary to stick together, love, and honor each other. Tiên Hóa encouraged people to live honestly, do only good things and resist killing each other. The songs also described

[12] The idea of a "spiritual revolution" (*cách mạng tâm linh*) can be found in the Way of Ho Chi Minh Jade Buddha at the Peace Temple. Through its self-published booklet "Following the Uncle's Way to Save the Nation from Now On," the master medium of the group reveals the spirits of Ho Chi Minh and his plan for a "spiritual revolution" to save the nation from all past and present "foreign enemies" (Hoang 2017: 94). I found the ideas of Tiên Hóa about problems and a crisis of this world of human beings similar to the Ho Chi Minh Jade Buddha group's explanation on the inappropriate attitude and behavior of people in this earthly realm and the interrelation among different realms (heavenly realm, Buddha's realm, Yin realm and earthly realm) (Hoang 2017: 94-95).

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this campaign as a new task and ordeal of Tiên Hóa and the delegation of her followers. Thus, they must adopt the mindset of the revolutionaries of the past and maintain their optimism.

Tiên Hóa believed that if people followed her call, she would defeat the enemy. At that time, Heaven would let her establish a New Life (*ra Đời Mới*). Then people would no longer have miserable lives; instead, everyone would live equitably and be happy with a leisurely life full of music. In 2008, her songs were sung at the beginning and end of every ritual. Tiên Hóa often sat next to the altar and appeared pleased to hear the songs; indeed, these seemed to be her happiest moments. Most of the people who knew these songs by heart were the musicians who sang Chầu Văn for the Lên Đồng rituals and the 20 female assistants at the temple. Apart from some adherents who frequented the temple, most of Tiên Hóa's followers did not remember and understand the songs very well. The faces of newcomers betrayed astonishment at the inclusion of these songs in the ritual. Tiên Hóa thought that sending a letter to the government to present her ideas, and requesting that the state media broadcast these songs regularly would enable people all over the country to learn and sing them. She believed that by doing that, she and all the country would defeat the Yin enemy.

Tiên Hóa cùng đất nước Việt Nam [The Immortal and Vietnam country]
Dẹp kẻ bạo tàn [Eliminate the evils]
Là loài yêu quái…[They are Yin enemies]
Tiên Hóa ra đời [The Immortal comes out]
Cứu khắp các nơi… [To save everyone]
Mà chẳng phải khổ [No one will be miserable]
Muôn đời sung sướng… [Will be forever happy]

To identify herself, Tiên Hóa only said that she was an immortal whose *curriculum vitae* included resisting French and Japanese invaders. From a pioneer in a revolutionary cause who had dug underground hideouts to defend cadres, she had seen major transitions in society and the world at the end of the twentieth

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century. Mindful of climate change and the current social transition, this woman wanted to warn people and convince them to live better lives and promote the nation's beautiful traditions to help overcome all the challenges and difficulties of the era.

Đã đội lệnh trời [After becoming children of the Heavenly Jade Emperor]
Là phải nghe lời [Must listen to the teachings]
Làm điều nhân đức [Should do virtuous deeds]
Mọi người ở thực [Everyone should be honest]
Đừng cậy chức quyền [Do not abuse authority]
Làm phúc trời thương [Do good deeds, Heaven be with you]
Khắp hết bốn phương [People everywhere]
Đều đi một đường… [All go in one way]

Tiên Hóa was readily accorded the respect and trust of followers through her revolutionary-style virtue. After the revolution succeeded, she did not declare her merits to gain position or power. When she practiced religion, she did not dwell on its benefits, which is rare among religious masters nowadays. Her imagination helped many solve their everyday problems at minimal cost. Her followers believed that their concerns were presented to and approved by spirits at the "central level" (*trung ương*) as the temple was considered as the center of Heaven's Gate. Other temples to deities of the Mother Goddess religion were felt to operate at a "local administrative level" (*địa phương*). If followers took their problems to plead at other temples, they might be disregarded.

Although Tiên Hóa mainly wanted to instill confidence in her own power, by showing the magical power given by spirits, and to spread her ideology widely, she still had to rely on the cult of Buddhism and the Mother Goddess religion. These two fundamental and widespread cults helped her to attract followers by meeting the high demands of contemporary Vietnamese for initiation rituals to become mediums. Many followers came from the surrounding provinces of Ha Tay (before), Hanoi, Hoa Binh, Bac Ninh, and Bac Giang, and some from even further away. This geographic range was

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coterminous with the area that she could influence by using magical powers to protect it from disasters. Tiên Hóa suggested that the limits of her magical power determined her sphere of influence. If Heaven gave her more, she might have wider influence. In the meantime, Tiên Hóa had to rely on her network to spread her influence. She led a group of spontaneous fortune-tellers, geomancers, and sorcerers in the region who travelled around surrounding provinces to offer professional advice to people to help solve their problems. These specialists often did the work of fortunetelling, finding lost graves or catching harmful spirits to protect families. If someone had a serious problem, they would advise them to see Tiên Hóa. And, as noted above, she easily won people's hearts by her virtue and morality. One of her followers described her in his poem as:

…Disdaining reputation and richness

Be the patriot when young, love the people when old…

Not only women and rural residents, but also some urban dwellers were convinced by her ideas. People welcomed her mostly because they acknowledged her great moral strength and understood that what she developed was very helpful for people at the time. Her work even won the sympathy of local cadres. Tiên Hóa's aim was to form a new religion of her own by creating new ritual practices and gathering followers by singing and experiencing rituals to become members of her family. Her story is gentle and meaningful, but it is hard to predict what will happen as Tiên Hóa is very old now. In 2008, she narrowly escaped death. She continued to organize an annual ritual on the 17th of August to receive more power from heaven. She and her followers are waiting for the spirits' decisions about her power and the chance to have a new life.

Compared to Sợi, the religious practice and ideology of Tiên Hóa felt lighter and more joyful. Her followers were primarily poor rural women who were sensitive to the transformation of the country. They felt confused and disoriented with the new social landscape, policy environment, and problems of exclusion from the

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society of some of the rural population surrounding them. Those two religious innovators had experienced a difficult but fruitful time when the whole society joined in the mobilization during the war and the period of collectivization. Then during the post-war period, the centralized state took responsibility for everyone. Revolution had brought them belongings and sustenance. But when the social and cultural transformation took place in the mid-1980s, people understood that they had to take more individual responsibility for themselves and their families. They could no longer expect as much care from the state as before. Moreover, they experienced new problems caused by the economic transformation, such as conflicts and tensions, lies and mistrust among villagers. Therefore, these spiritual leaders had reoriented themselves by selecting prominent symbols from the state discourse to make sense of the new and unfamiliar social landscape of post-revolutionary society. They imagined that all the new problems of society were enemies (*quân thù*) and people should recover the ideology of revolution (*người cách mạng*) to struggle (*đấu tranh*) with this new war. By appropriating the meaning and standards of revolution, these rural women tried to find meaning in life and reintegrate themselves in the society. As it was a problem for the entire country, they imagined that only "central level" spirits in heaven and the universe could address their issue.

Ⅳ. Conclusion

The examples of new religious ideas and practice discussed herein have shown the religious creativity of people in rural northern Vietnam two decades after the 1986 reform. The motivations of the local people taking part in these religious networks and the way religious masters lead their followers in practicing the rituals reveal a range of problems that people have been experiencing in the marketized and globalized society such as uncertainty, anxiety and a lack of trust. The new policy framework has inadvertently created these issues of confusion and disorientation among rural people, most especially among poor women. These accounts have also proven that rural people showed creativity and innovation to

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respond to their problems.

In response to the uncertainty of the market economy, like their urban counterparts, people in Bac Dong and the surrounding areas have come to rely upon the familiar spirits of the Mother Goddess religion who embody market relations and market power in the history of the country. By relating themselves to symbols of the Mother Goddess cult which has become a regional and even transnational religious network, they searched for a common reference point, language, and standard to cope with the risks and challenges of the new market world. People imagined that the spiritual relatedness they develop by surrounding themselves with these imperial metaphors enable them to overcome their anxiety and accommodate to the modern industrial world outside.

In a society marked by atomization and cultural and moral confusion, some women in the village found that recently emerging religious leaders in the Delta offered special support to the poor and marginalized like themselves. These people felt that their poverty, abandonment and exclusion were ameliorated by their participation in new religious movements. Their problems were addressed by new imaginary spiritual patrons, and by a revolutionary moral order, rather than by the practices of mutual material exchange that informed most Mother Goddess community networks. People have tried to recover meanings, standards, and symbols from revolutionary discourse to reorient themselves, overcome their alienation and make sense of the unfamiliar social landscape of the post-revolutionary society. They believed that only the imperial metaphor (Feuchtwang 2001) of Heaven, together with revolutionary morality, can solve their problems and change the society. In this sense, as distinguished from the dynamic of dialogic relation that Luong (2007) and Malarney (1996) describe, instead of resisting the state's ideas on reforming rituals, local people in these accounts have inserted the ideologies of the revolutionary socialist state into their religious practices.

These examples, together with findings of research on new religious groups in the north Delta Vietnam (Hoang 2017), confirm that most of the new religious movements in the region after the

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1986 economic reform have the ideology of millenarian movements. However, these movements and their contexts are quite different from other manifestations of millenarianism in the world. The complex problems people face and the diversity of solutions they have adopted enrich our sense of recent religious phenomena in Vietnam.

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Received: Apr. 7, 2022; Reviewed: Nov. 16, 2022; Accepted: Jan. 12, 2023

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