

From Folk Ritual to a National Heritage Festival: The Reorganization Process of the Tianhou Pagoda Festival in Binh Duong Province, Vietnam

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[*Abstract*]

Originating from Putian, Fujian (China), the worship of Mazu (Vietnamese: Thiên Hậu) was brought to Southern Vietnam by Chinese migrants and has become deeply embedded in the cultural-religious life of Binh Duong. Once a community-led folk ritual, the annual Tianhou Pagoda Festival in Thu Dau Mot has been gradually institutionalized through state involvement, transforming into a symbol of multicultural identity and a promoted cultural tourism site. Applying the concept of "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm) and Marxist anthropological approaches to political economy, this article examines the restructuring of the festival in Binh Duong. The findings indicate that (1) tradition is not static but continually adapts to economic, social, and historical contexts; (2) restructuring involves cultural negotiations among diverse actors, reflecting the complex interplay within local communities and between these communities and the state; and (3) this process leads to the deconstruction of traditional norms, resulting in new cultural form.

Keywords: Folk rituals, invented tradition, national heritage, Tianhou Pagoda Festival, Binh Duong Province

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I . Introduction

Over the past few decades, festivals have emerged as an important lens for scholars to study the complex relationships between ritual, cultural identity, state power, and the political economy of heritage, especially in postcolonial contexts such as Vietnam. In such settings, festivals are not merely spaces for the reenactment of religious practices, but also dynamic arenas where localization processes, the restructuring of collective memory, and encounters among socio-political forces occur.

The Tianhou Festival at the Tianhou Pagoda (Vietnamese: Chùa Bà Thiên Hậu) in Binh Duong serves as a compelling example of the transformation of a diasporic religious ritual into both a form of cultural heritage and a tourism asset. Originating within the Sino-Vietnamese community as a veneration of Mazu, a maritime goddess widely worshipped in southern China, the festival encapsulates the trajectory of migration and cultural adaptation of the Hoa people, while simultaneously reflects how religious beliefs are reshaped in new cultural landscapes.

Remarkably, the festival has transcended the boundaries of the Hoa community and attracted substantial participation from ethnic Vietnamese devotees. This widespread appeal may be due in part to the compatibility between Mazu worship and indigenous beliefs, particularly the veneration of Guanyin of the Southern Sea (南海觀音). This syncretism has facilitated the “Vietnamization” of the Mazu figure, allowing her to integrate smoothly into Vietnam’s prevailing Buddhist belief system. Although the festival is not Buddhist in origin, it is nonetheless widely recognized as a *chùa* (pagoda) festival—a hybrid cultural-religious event. This phenomenon helps explain why the pagoda is commonly referred to by Vietnamese worshippers as *Chùa Bà Binh Duong* (Lady’s Pagoda of Binh Duong), instead of *Miếu Thiên Hậu* (Tianhou Temple) or Mazu Temple, as is typical in other Vietnamese Chinese (Vietnamese: Hoa) communities.

Originally a grassroots ritual centered around belief, performance, and community solidarity, the Tianhou Festival has

become increasingly institutionalized through processes of heritage recognition and tourism development.

For the Vietnamese Chinese community in southern Vietnam, particularly in Binh Duong, the Tianhou Festival is not merely a religious celebration honoring the Mother Goddess.

Following the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) reforms of 1986 and the normalization of Vietnam–China diplomatic relations in 1991, along with relaxed religious policies and the issuance of Resolution No. 5 from the 8th Central Committee Plenum regarding the preservation of national cultural identity, the Tianhou Festival was officially revived.

Several ritual elements have been modernized, especially the emphasis on the goddess-mother figure, signaling a shift in ritual structures historically dominated by male authority.

The reconstruction of the Tianhou Festival in Binh Duong raises important questions: Why has this particular ritual been selected for state-supported preservation and promotion, while others have not? What are the dynamics of this process?

While recent studies have shifted the analytical focus from class struggle to historical-sociological perspectives (Taylor 2001), the Tianhou Festival demonstrates how a diasporic folk practice can be reimagined as a national cultural symbol. This shift is deeply entangled with spatial transformations, evolving social roles, and the reframing of cultural value systems.

Although prior scholarship has addressed the post-*Đổi Mới* (Renovation) revival of the festival, there remains a lack of comprehensive analysis regarding the mechanisms through which this folk ritual has been reconstituted as a symbol of national culture. This article seeks to fill that gap by analyzing the Tianhou Festival as a phenomenon at the intersection of religion, politics, and economics.

In Vietnam, post-1954 social science analysis often emphasizes class conflict from a Marxist perspective while recognizing the role of community festivals in fostering unity (Luong and Truong 2012).

The ceremony, reminiscent of royal court rituals, elevates the status of the elite in traditional rural communities, revealing past societal misconceptions.

The expansion of Vietnam's market economy has spurred the vigorous development of folk festivals, giving rise to new debates centered on "reconstruction," "invention," and "restructuring," rather than mere preservation.

A qualitative research design was employed, including ethnographic fieldwork in Binh Duong, semi-structured interviews with community members and heritage managers, as well as archival and policy document analysis. This methodological approach establishes a rigorous empirical basis for the theoretical investigation advanced in this study.

II. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study employs two complementary theoretical frameworks: Eric Hobsbawm's (1983) concept of the "invention of tradition" and a political economy-inflected anthropological approach inspired by Marxist thought. Both approaches offer essential analytical tools for examining how cultural practices and rituals are reproduced and adapted within shifting social, economic, and political contexts.

Hobsbawm's concept of "creative traditions" refers to cultural practices, rituals, or customs that are presented as ancient but are modern constructions (Hobsbawm 1983). In the case of the Tianhou Pagoda Festival, the elevation of a folk ritual to the status of state-recognized "intangible cultural heritage" serves as a typical illustration of this process.

The concept of "tradition" as a flexible and adaptive process lies at the heart of this study's findings. The research argues that tradition is not immutable but rather a continuous process of adaptation to changes in social, political, and economic contexts. As Hobsbawm emphasizes, customs and rituals that appear ancient and

fixed are often the products of specific historical circumstances and state intervention. In the Tianhou Pagoda Festival, core ritual elements such as offering ceremonies, processions, and lion dances are preserved, yet have been restructured by state involvement, tourism expansion, and the demands of a globalized economy.

In Vietnam, the concept of “tradition” has a profound meaning originating from Confucian thought, often expressed through customs “passed down from generation to generation” (Duong 2011:16). Traditional rituals are not merely commemorative acts; they also serve as vehicles for transmitting ideas, values, and cultural symbols to future generations, emphasizing reverence for the past and the symbolic value of ritual (Beiner 2001). As Hobsbawm notes, traditions serve the functions of (1) promoting group cohesion, (2) legitimizing social institutions and authority, and (3) educating and transmitting values, beliefs, and behaviors.

Community rituals and commemorative practices become tools through which the state restructures and adjusts historical narratives to meet contemporary needs, while also reinforcing societal cohesion and power (Hobsbawm 1983). Thus, elites may utilize tradition as a means of manipulating class relations, imposing rituals and customs upon the masses to manufacture consent and legitimize their authority (Beiner 2001).

Conversely, proponents of tradition revival contend that tradition is more closely aligned with vernacular memory and less influenced by official propaganda. Therefore, “invented tradition” should be understood as the outcome of dialogue and negotiation rather than simply top-down imposition (Beiner 2001).

Scholars such as Arjun Appadurai (1996) and John Comaroff (2009) have argued that under neoliberal regimes, cultural activities—including festivals—are increasingly commodified, repurposed for tourism, or employed as tools of soft power. From this perspective, the state’s involvement in the Tianhou Pagoda Festival is not merely symbolic but part of a broader cultural governance strategy aimed at managing identity and fostering regional economic development.

By integrating these two theoretical frameworks, this study

moves beyond a descriptive approach to uncover the structural logics and political dynamics that shape the transformation of the festival. Focusing on the invention, adaptation, and commercialization of tradition, it illuminates how heritage becomes a contested domain wherein communities, the state, and market forces continually negotiate meaning, ownership, and legitimacy.

Through the dual lenses of Hobsbawm's "invented tradition" and political economy anthropology, this study examines not only the symbolic transformation of the festival but also the material and institutional forces shaping its contemporary form. The transition of the festival from a community ritual to a state-managed cultural heritage event reveals tensions between tradition and modernity, religion and nationalism, and between community actors and state authority in contemporary Vietnam.

2.2. Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative methodology, combining ethnographically-informed fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and discourse analysis to investigate the transformation of the Tianhou Pagoda Festival in Binh Duong. The aim is not only to document observable changes in the festival's form and organization but also to understand the negotiation of meaning, power, and identity mediated through the relationships among stakeholders.

The study began in February 2017, when the first festival was held at the second location, Tianhou Pagoda in Hoa Phu Ward, Binh Duong New City, and continued until the most recent celebration in February 2024. The study involved multiple participations in the festival, focusing on both its religious and public performative dimensions.

As a researcher, I participated in festival-related activities such as goddess worship rituals, processions, and community performances at both sites, carefully documenting participant actions and conversations. This dual role as both observer and participant enabled immersive engagement with the festival's spatial, emotional, and experiential dimensions.

Recognizing that the festival is a complex cultural phenomenon involving multiple stakeholders, I conducted more than 20 in-depth interviews with community members, local government representatives, and cultural practitioners at both pagoda sites. These interviews aimed to capture diverse perspectives on the meaning of the festival, its transformation over time, and the role of the state. The conversations also revealed sensitive conflicts, processes of negotiation, and compromises between individual motivations and broader sociopolitical movements.

In addition to fieldwork and interviews, this study also employed document and discourse analysis. Secondary textual and visual materials related to Tianhou worship and the festival in Binh Duong were collected and analyzed. These included books, journal articles, academic studies, and state and local policy reports on cultural heritage, as well as legends and historical documents about the pagoda and festival. Government documents relating to heritage recognition and cultural policy, festival programs, banners, signage, media coverage, and tourism promotional materials were also reviewed. These materials provided essential data that reflect the historical and political contexts of the festival.

Discourse analysis in this study focuses on how the festival is framed in public discourse—as a religious act, a symbol of cultural pride, or a tourism event—and how these framings shift across different community and institutional contexts.

Given the political and cultural sensitivity surrounding heritage and religious practices, a reflexive approach was employed throughout the data collection and analysis processes. Ethical principles, including informed consent and data confidentiality, were strictly observed throughout the study.

III. Research Findings and Discussion

3.1. Historical Context and Initial Form of the Tianhou Festival in Binh Duong, Vietnam

The Tianhou belief system was introduced to Vietnam through

waves of cultural exchange, primarily facilitated by the migration of Chinese merchants and communities from southeastern China. Beginning in the 16th and 17th centuries, the festival began to emerge in southern Vietnam, initially confined to the ritual practices of Chinese guilds and associations, primarily within pagoda precincts, before gradually spreading to the local Vietnamese populace (Nguyen 2017: 65).

The Chinese diaspora in these areas carried with them a rich system of traditional religious practices, with the Tianhou Festival occupying a central position, not only as a spiritual tradition but also as a medium for community cohesion.

In the study "Người Hoa ở Bình Duong-Lịch sử và hiện trạng" (The Chinese in Binh Duong-History and Current Status), Huynh (2010) identified four main Chinese groups in Thu Dau Mot: Cantonese, Fujian, Chaozhou, and Hakka (Chongzheng). Although these communities had a longstanding presence, it was not until the late 19th century, amidst the flourishing of the Phu Cuong Market and growing commercial demand, that formal religious institutions began to emerge. A typical example is the establishment of Tianhou Pagoda (Vietnamese: Thiên Hậu Cung), located at 04 Nguyen Du Street, Phu Cuong Ward, Thu Dau Mot City.

Initially, the festival was an insular religious event, rooted in traditional folk rituals such as incense offerings, processions, and lion dances, organized autonomously by Chinese guilds without state involvement. The festival served as a space for reconstructing collective memory and asserting cultural identity in a diasporic context, while simultaneously fulfilling the need for community solidarity.

During the Nguyễn Dynasty, particularly between 1826 and 1850, the Tianhou cult received official state recognition through imperial decrees, such as the titles "Hồng Từ Bác Nghĩa An Tế Thượng Đẳng Thần" (1826) and "Hồng Từ Bác Nghĩa An Tế Phổ Trạch Linh Hựu Gia Trang Thiên Phi Thượng Đẳng Thần" (1850) (Duong 2018: 15). The feudal court's grants represented the official legitimization of folk beliefs and were consistent with state policies to manage and stabilize ethnic minority communities in the newly

incorporated territories.

The annual celebration is centered around Tianhou Pagoda, built in 1867 by the Hokkien community along the Hương Chủ Hiếu Canal (now within Phu Cuong Ward, Thu Dau Mot City) (Huynh 2010: 64). The ritual elements of the festival are deeply influenced by Confucian ceremonial structures, closely aligned with religious traditions from Southern China. Although there were adjustments to adapt to the conditions of the new land, the core elements such as titles, virtues, moral qualities and rituals to pay tribute to the goddess Tianhou such as *Mộc Dục* (the ritual of bathing the statue), costume changes, palanquin processions, opening seals and praying remained intact. The *Vía Bà* (goddess's day) is presided over by a chief priest, nominated by four rotating Chinese groups, in coordination with a ritual committee that oversees essential rituals such as *Mộc Dục* and costume changes.

The festive atmosphere draws participation from both Chinese and Vietnamese residents, particularly during the palanquin procession. Households along the parade route set up incense altars to welcome the deity. Upon the palanquin's return, organizers perform an incense offering ritual to conclude the goddess's symbolic "visit to the people," reinforcing the sacred link between the deity and everyday life (Vo et al. 2016: 439–488).

As shared by Mr. B, a Cantonese resident of Phu Cuong Ward, Thu Dau Mot City, the Tianhou Festival represents a continuum of intergenerational cultural transmission: "The festival is passed down from year to year, generation to generation, and it repeats according to a regular cycle in January, associated with the Lunar New Year."¹

It served as a conduit between humans and the divine, while reinforcing social structure through collective ritual expression.

Of particular note is the shift from male-centered protective deities to the veneration of a female deity—an uncommon transformation within both Chinese and Vietnamese religious landscapes. Despite its foreign origins, the festival has undergone

¹ Interviewed Mr. B in Phu Cuong Ward on February 2, 2024.

profound Vieticization and now forms an integral part of Binh Duong's intangible cultural heritage, situated within a context of ethnic and religious pluralism.

Until 1954, the festival remained largely insular, contained within the Chinese community and relatively untouched by state cultural policy. This transformation, while enriching, also presents challenges in preserving the authenticity and structural integrity of traditional folk cultural elements.

3.2. The Tianhou Festival in Binh Duong and the Process of Traditional Re-Creation

The Tianhou Pagoda Festival in Binh Duong serves as a salient example of the fusion between the sacred and the secular, reflecting a dialectical relationship between culture, belief, and society. The festival is not simply a reenactment of religious rituals related to the worship of Tianhou Shengmu, a sea goddess of Chinese origin, but also a site of interaction between the state, local communities, and market forces in renegotiating tradition in a modern context (Dean 1998).

3.2.1. Ritual Space, Temporal Framework, and the Institutionalization: Reconstruction Process of Tradition

The Tianhou Festival in Binh Duong, originally originating from the folk beliefs of the Vietnamese Chinese community, has undergone significant historical changes, especially since the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) period after 1986. This post-reform era witnessed a notable shift in state governance policies toward greater relaxation, thereby enabling the proliferation of diverse and flexible religious practices. The promulgation of the Ordinance on Belief and Religion (2004) marked the establishment of a new legal framework, while promoting the institutionalization of festival activities as part of the national socio-cultural development strategy (Nguyen 2012; Luong and Truong 2012).

Consequently, the Tianhou Festival has attracted the active involvement of local authorities in its organization and management, aiming to foster economic development, promote tourism, and preserve national cultural identity. However, this

institutionalization process gives rise to tensions between ritual authenticity, community spiritual needs, and political-economic interests (Taylor 2004).

Distinct from China's centralized management model or the prevalent civil self-governance in Taiwan, the Tianhou Festival in Binh Duong exemplifies a hybrid governance model in which state and community actors co-manage the festival. This reflects a strategy of *cultural negotiation*, wherein the state acts not only as a patron but also as an active agent in shaping cultural identities aligned with national development agendas (Salemink 2001). Concurrently, the local Chinese community has adapted its religious practices to accommodate new policies and contemporary social contexts.



<Photo 1> The Main Hall at Tianhou Pagoda in Binh Duong New City (Taken by Dang Thi Kieu Oanh on 24/10/2023)



<Photo 2> The Main Hall at Tianhou Pagoda in Phu Cuong Ward (Taken by Dang Thi Kieu Oanh on 24/10/2023)

An important turning point in the institutionalization process was the request by the provincial government (Binh Duong province) to the Vietnamese government to expand worship and ritual activities to two separate locations: the traditional Tianhou Pagoda in Phu Cuong Ward and a newly built pagoda in the modern urban development area of Binh Duong New City, which began construction in 2010. Since 2017, parallel ritual processions have been held at both sites, representing efforts to bridge tradition and modernity and reaffirm culture's role in shaping the identity of emerging urban spaces. Nonetheless, despite significant governmental investment, the new pagoda lacks spiritual depth, illustrating a trend

toward the commodification of religion for local economic development purposes.

Field research indicates that there are currently at least seven Tianhou worship sites in Binh Duong. However, only two—the pagodas in Phu Cuong and Hoa Phu—host the grand procession of the Tianhou effigy, a central festival event held during the first lunar month, marking the commencement of the annual festival season.

Regarding timing, the Tianhou palanquin processions are held in two different locations at different times. At the Tianhou Pagoda in Phu Cuong, the ritual was initially held on the night of the 14th day of the lunar month, later moved to the afternoon of the 15th, and since 2010 has been fixed on the 26th of the first lunar month. According to the organizing committee, this change was made to ensure solemnity and public safety amid increasing crowds (Vo 2013: 72). Meanwhile, since 2017, the palanquin procession at the new pagoda in Hoa Phu has been held on the 9th day of the first lunar month. This temporal bifurcation reflects a reconfiguration of ritual practices in response to the institutionalization of heritage and the community's diverse cultural and religious needs.

Mr. H, a Chinese Vietnamese intellectual, formerly a member of the Pagoda Management Board, said, “In 2011, construction started in Binh Duong New City, and the provincial government invested in Vietnam's largest Tianhou Pagoda in the city center. Since 2017, the Tianhou Festival has been held every two years at both locations, with different times and rituals. Authorities attribute the expansion of worship facilities and festival activities to the community's spiritual needs, in line with the Binh Duong New City Development Project.”²

The Tianhou Festival in Binh Duong comprises three fundamental elements: pilgrims, tangible cultural assets (architecture, symbols, and artifacts), and intangible elements (beliefs, memories, and rituals). The pagoda is located at the center of the festival, and it is not only a sacred place but also the main place to perform rituals. The divergence between the two worship sites illustrates a

² Interviewed Mr. H in Phu Cuong Ward on February 24, 2024.

spatial differentiation between sacredness and politico-economic functionality.

The state's effort to nationalize the festival is reflected in the integration of traditional cultural symbols (such as dragons, lions, and floats) with national symbols (including national flags and the presence of military and police forces) in the procession. However, such deep state involvement in ritual space prompts concerns over the community's autonomy in religious expression. In the context of the development of digital media, festivals also expand from *physical space* to *virtual space*, which also poses new challenges in festival heritage management.

From a comparative perspective, while China pursues a policy of nationalization and standardization of religious activities to strengthen national identity (Chan 2005), Taiwan adopts a community-based management model (Sangren 2017), and Malaysia opts for selective support with minimal state intervention in a multi-religious context (Tan 2018), the Tianhou Festival in Binh Duong shows a form of flexible adaptation, combining both centralized control similar to the Chinese model and community-based management similar to the Taiwanese model.

The Tianhou Festival in Binh Duong can be seen as a typical example of the soft integration model—a form in which the state and the community participate in the process of co-creating cultural heritage. Through flexible interaction mechanisms, these two subjects not only preserve but also renew traditions, contributing to shaping the community's identity. This co-production process reflects the complex interweaving of historical, political, economic, and cultural factors, thereby deeply influencing the orientation of national cultural development.

3.2.2. The Politicization of Festival Heritage: The Processes of Theatricalization, Secularization, and Commercialization

Under the influence of the economic reform *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) and the extensive process of globalization, the Tianhou Festival in Binh Duong has undergone significant changes. Originally a distinct religious space for the Chinese-Vietnamese community, the festival has been increasingly redefined as a public cultural-touristic event

aligned with the province's socio-economic development strategies.

Orienting festivals to become cultural tourism resources, associated with investment in developing infrastructure for tourism and building the festival brand as a typical cultural product bearing the mark of "Binh Duong," has changed both the goal and the way of organizing festivals. From mainly serving the religious life of the community, festivals are gradually being organized in a professional direction, to meet the requirements of economic-tourism development and promote the image of Binh Duong. From a primarily devotional event serving local worshippers, the festival has evolved into a large-scale public spectacle, featuring carefully choreographed performances aimed at mass audiences. Traditional elements such as rituals, offerings, and the palanquin procession have been simplified or modified to align with contemporary tastes and the demands of mass tourism.

A notable development in the festival is the shift in language used in worship rituals, from Chinese to Vietnamese. This change not only reflects the process of cultural transformation but also shows the flexible fusion between the original ethnic traditions and the local cultural context, contributing to shaping the multi-layered identity of the festival. The once elaborate *prayers for national peace and public well-being* have been streamlined; ritual offerings, once deeply embedded in regional Chinese dialect traditions, have become increasingly hybridized.

The diversity of offerings among different Chinese congregations—from savory dishes to fruit, tea, alcohol, birthday cakes, and fresh flowers during the celebration on the 23rd day of the third lunar month—illustrates the growing influence of Western customs and contemporary consumer preferences (Vo et al. 2016: 439–448). What were once communal and egalitarian offerings now increasingly serve as symbols of affluence and individual expression, spurring the growth of commercial services revolving around the festival economy.

A notable example is the lantern auction, which, while rooted in traditional ritual, has been restructured into an event combining spiritual meaning with community fundraising. The number of

auctioned lanterns has been reduced from 12 (symbolizing the months of the year) to 9, leveraging the auspicious symbolism of “cửu” (longevity), while also accommodating time constraints (Vo 2013: 78–79). Mr. H believes that the lanterns with their vibrant colors and sophisticated designs are not simply ritual objects, but also symbols of wealth and prosperity in cultural life.³ Public announcements of auction winners and prices, alongside dragon, lion, and qilin dances and the parade of symbolic characters such as the Tang Monk and the Eight Immortals (Vo et al. 2016: 489–514), all seem to indicate the theatricality and commercialization of the festival.

According to the pagoda's administrative board, auction proceeds were previously used to assist economically disadvantaged members of the Chinese community; today, with improved living conditions, funds are redirected to broader philanthropic initiatives, signaling an expanded scope and beneficiary base. The council affirmed that the festival is no longer limited to the beliefs of the Chinese, but has become a common occasion for the entire community, attracting increasing support from other residents (Voice of Vietnam-External Relations Department, October 5, 2019)

The Tianhou Pagoda Festival in Phu Cuong Ward has thus become not merely a traditional religious observance, but a major springtime event in southeastern Vietnam. In addition to the customary prayers of blessing, the festival is now also a place for community bonding and cross-cultural solidarity between the Chinese-Vietnamese and other demographic groups.

Residents' reflections highlight the festival's ability to bridge ethnic divides. Mrs. D, a lottery ticket vendor near Tianhou Pagoda, explained: “Originally, Tianhou was worshipped by the Chinese, but there are many Vietnamese people here too. Anyone living near the pagoda receives her blessings, regardless of ethnicity—everyone believes in her.”⁴

Similarly, Mrs. H, a Vietnamese vendor at Thu Dau Mot

³ Interviewed Mr. H in Phu Cuong Ward on February 24, 2024.

⁴ Interviewed Mrs. D in Phu Cuong Ward on February 24, 2024.

Market, said that this is a traditional festival, known to have existed for a long time, originally for the Chinese community, but later also for the Vietnamese to participate.”⁵

The procession marches through the main streets of Thu Dau Mot city, with a rich and diverse group of participants. First in the cue is the *Hầu* dance troupe, followed by artists dressed as typical characters in Chinese culture, such as Tang Monk and his disciples, Bat Tien, along with lion and dragon dance teams, flower-holding girls, traditional musicians, and a splendidly decorated palanquin. All create a harmony between sacred ritual elements and unique cultural performances.

Yet, the expansion in scale has coincided with an intensified process of “theatricalization.” Religious rituals are increasingly transformed into “social performances,” with each segment meticulously scripted, complete with props, lighting, sound systems, and stage direction. The 2024 Tianhou Festival is a prime example of the transformation like the festival: with the participation of the longest dragon in Vietnam (over 68 meters long), more than 25 lion and dragon dance troupes (Nguyen 2024), along with a rich art program and elaborate visual staging, the festival has taken on the mark of a “cultural parade” rather than a traditional religious ceremony. Even core rituals such as the blessing ceremony during the procession have been simplified or replaced by symbolic acts such as exchanging lucky money envelopes or burning incense beforehand.

Simultaneously, the mass media have come to play a central role in promoting the festival as a multicultural and internationally relevant cultural-historical symbol of Vietnam. However, with growing influence, private businesses and media organizations, in the role of sponsors, have become the main driving force in the process of socialization and commercialization of this event. As economic criteria and mass consumer logic come to shape the festival, the traditional roles of Chinese community associations have waned, while the involvement of state and private actors has become increasingly prominent. This raises concerns about

⁵ Interviewed Mrs. H at the Thu Dau Mot Market on February 24, 2024.

preserving the authenticity and intrinsic value of the Tianhou Festival cultural heritage.

The processes of theatricalization, secularization, and commercialization reflect not only the adaptive capacity of cultural practices in modern contexts but also reveal internal tensions between economic development goals and the imperative to preserve spiritual depth and communal identity—the very foundations of intangible heritage value.

3.2.3. Restructuring the Organizational Entity and Participation in the Festival

3.2.3.1 The Shift in the Organizational Structure of the Festival: From Community Self-Management to Public-Private Co-Management Model

The Tianhou Pagoda Festival in Binh Duong has undergone a profound organizational restructuring process, marked by a clear transition from a self-managed community model to a co-organized framework involving state authorities, social organizations, and market entities. This process is the result of cultural policies, notably the Festival Organization Regulation of 2001 and Decree No. 11/2006/ND-CP, which laid the foundation for the division of labor and coordination among relevant stakeholders in festival organization.

Currently, the organizational model of the Tianhou Pagoda Festival consists of at least two co-existing systems:

Official Organizing Committee: This structure is established with the participation of various levels of government and community social organizations. The committee plays a decisive role in directing and overseeing festival activities, ensuring their legitimacy and compliance with legal regulations.

Traditional Committees: These include structures established by community organizations, with different names and forms depending on the region, such as the Honorary Committee, the Anniversary Committee, and various volunteer associations (Women's Union, Veterans' Association, Youth Union, etc.).

The collaboration between the management of Tianhou Pagoda—traditionally overseen by four Chinese clans—and local government agencies has become a key factor in ensuring the success of the festival. Not only does this collaboration facilitate the operation of the rituals, but it also preserves the symbolic significance and order of the event. Specifically, the pagoda is managed by four Chinese groups (Cantonese, Fujian, Teochew, and Chaozhou), with each group taking turns overseeing the pagoda's activities every year.⁶ However, in important meetings, all four groups convene to make collective decisions. When organizing the festival, these groups are divided into specialized committees, with the Lantern Auction Committee and the Palanquin Procession Committee playing the most important roles, contributing to the success of festival activities.

This change reflects the broader trend of restructuring the festival organization from a traditional self-managed model to a multi-party co-management form, in which stakeholders from the community, the state, and the market collaborate. This approach enhances the efficiency of festival organization and ensures the preservation of the cultural values associated with the festival.

3.2.3.2 The Increasing Role of the State and the Politicization of the Festival

From the role of indirectly recognizing and supervising festival activities, local authorities have now been proactive in organizing, providing logistics, security, promoting, and managing festivals. The emergence of cultural-tourism agencies, state-owned enterprises, and mass media has contributed to the "formalization" of the festival, turning it from a folk event into a politically driven and state-centered activity. Rituals such as opening speeches and drum beating are now performed by senior provincial leaders, demonstrating the official involvement of the State and a clear demonstration of the modern festival model. However, this process also raises questions about the cultural authenticity and inherent religious significance of the festival, particularly when the festival is redefined as a symbol of Vietnam's multicultural identity.

⁶ Interviewed Mr. H in Phu Cuong Ward on February 24, 2024.

3.2.3.3 The Transformation of the Community's Role and Cultural Negotiations

In the past, the festival was primarily organized by the Chinese community in Thu Dau Mot, within a clearly defined cultural autonomy framework. However, the increasing intervention of the state through funding, logistics, and content regulation has altered the balance of organizational power. While this has helped elevate the festival to the level of regional or national cultural heritage, it has simultaneously diminished the community's proactive role, gradually shifting them from organizers to spectators. This reflects the complex cultural negotiations in contemporary Vietnamese society, where communities strive to preserve their identities through negotiations with the State, thereby forming a model of *State and People Working Together*.

3.2.3.4 Expanding Participation: From a Closed Community to a Diverse Public Space

At the Tianhou Pagoda festival, I witnessed a continuous stream of people entering venues, respectfully offering incense, praying and presenting offerings, creating a sacred and bustling atmosphere. Based on their modes of transportation, manner of movement, and clothing, it is evident that the visitors come from various social strata and regions.

The expansion in scale and participation is one of the most prominent changes. Over time, the Tianhou Festival has become a major cultural and tourism event, attracting thousands of visitors, both domestic and international. This transformation not only broadened its reach but also changed the spatial structure of the festival, with the involvement of various participants who are not purely devotees, but also tourists, officials, performers, and businesses.

However, the increasing involvement of non-community elements has posed significant challenges to the sanctity and spiritual depth of the festival. Activities such as photography, social media posts, and the consumerist attitude toward participation have gradually turned the festival space into a visual event, diluting the traditional religious essence of the celebration.

3.2.3.5 Gender and the Reshaping of Roles in Ritual Spaces

An important change in the social structure of the festival is the growing role of women. The prominent presence of women in incense-offering groups, women's associations, and official ceremonial roles indicates a shift in contemporary Vietnamese social ideology regarding gender equality and the spread of feminist values. While some traditional notions of "pollution" in rituals still exist, the public participation of women in the sacred space marks a significant step forward in the modern structure of the festival.

3.2.3.6 Privatization and Commercialization in Festival Organization

Alongside state participation, private entities, most notably the Becamex IDC Group, also play a significant role in funding and organizing the festival. This marks the trend of the "privatization" of the festival, where the market has become a key negotiating party, influencing the way the festival is presented, promoted, and exploited. The combination of religious, cultural, and economic elements not only restructures the festival but also creates tensions around the definition of identity and the goals of the event.

3.3. The Restructuring Dynamics of the Tianhou Pagoda Festival in Binh Duong

The Tianhou Pagoda Festival in Binh Duong is a typical case of the process of innovation and the inheritance of traditions in the context of modernization and globalization. The restructuring of this festival is the result of a process of negotiation and reshaping of social relations, based on the synthesis of many economic, political, cultural and social factors. To fully and deeply understand the dynamics of this restructuring, a multidimensional approach is needed, considering the diverse perspectives of the practicing community, regulatory bodies, researchers, as well as economic forces and the media.

Changes in the structure of the festival are not merely reactions to external shifts, but also reflect active choices made by cultural agents to adapt and assert identity in the new context. Both subjective factors, such as the desire to assert community status and the need to preserve traditions, and objective factors, such as urban

development pressures, cultural policies, and trends toward commercialization, have played crucial roles in driving this process.

3.3.1. Subjective Drivers

3.3.1.1 Economic Factors and Belief in the Sacred

The subjective drivers of the restructuring of the Tianhou Pagoda Festival largely stem from endogenous changes within the community that organizes and practices the festival. Changes in demographic structure, economic conditions, education levels, as well as socio-cultural factors, have reshaped community perceptions, resulting in significant changes in the organization and operation of the festival.

The development of festivals is closely linked to economic growth, migration, and changes in urban lifestyles. In particular, the process of resettlement and urban expansion in Binh Duong New City has directly impacted community structure as well as folk rituals. Additionally, adjustments in the local administrative apparatus have contributed to the restructuring of internal community factors, thus reshaping the religious space.

In the context of a market economy, spiritual practices—including the worship of Tianhou—have become increasingly intertwined with economic motives. The Tianhou Pagoda Festival not only has spiritual significance but also generates considerable economic benefits through pilgrimage activities and related tourism services. The sudden increase in the number of visitors has promoted the development of the local commercial service system and infrastructure, thereby significantly affecting the religious life as well as the livelihood of the community.

The shift of the festival's center from Phu Cuong, the original pagoda location, to Binh Duong New City, with its lower population density, places the community in a dilemma. As Uncle A expressed, "When I got there, I didn't know what to do or how to live."⁷

Economic pressures and the need to maintain religious life require both the government and the community to seek adaptive

⁷ Interviewed Uncle A in Phu Cuong Ward on February 24, 2024.

solutions. An urgent solution that the government needs to implement is to establish new places of worship and organize corresponding festivals in the new area, to meet the spiritual needs of the people, and at the same time promote population stability in the newly opened area.

The move from Phu Cuong, home to the traditional Tianhou Pagoda and a dense urban population, to the sparsely populated Binh Duong New City, poses a major challenge for residents. They not only wish to maintain their traditional worship beliefs but also face economic considerations.

In the context of a market economy with many potential risks and fluctuations, the Tianhou Festival has become a spiritual fulcrum where people seek peace and prosperity. This has changed the worship function, from the protection of seafarers. Mazu (Holy Mother) has now become a symbol of luck and success in business. Ms. H, a Vietnamese trader at Thu Dau Mot Market, shared: "Everyone believes in *Bà* (Holy Mother). Every year, when she passes by the market, we set up an incense table to ask for her blessings, luck, and prosperity in business."⁸

Echoing this inclusive spirit, Ms. C noted: "Anyone on the street can join the procession. People believe that participating in the procession of the Holy Mother will bring them good luck."⁹

Similarly, Ms. N, a participant in the parade, added: "The procession serves to dispel evil spirits and ward off misfortune and bad luck."¹⁰

Urbanization, industrialization, and modernization have reconfigured the social functions of traditional deities, assigning them new roles that reflect contemporary concerns. Tianhou, historically revered primarily as a guardian of seafarers, has undergone a symbolic transformation to encompass broader aspirations, including commercial success and overall well-being. Notably, practices such as "borrowing money from the deity," once

⁸ Interviewed Mrs. H at the Thu Dau Mot Market on February 24, 2024.

⁹ Interviewed Ms. C in Binh Duong New City on February 18, 2024.

¹⁰ Interviewed Ms. N in Binh Duong New City on February 18, 2024.

predominantly associated with the God of Wealth, are now increasingly extended to Tianhou, indicating her evolving relevance within a diversified spiritual economy.

Field observations show that belief in the sacredness and protective ability of Tianhou is a strong motivating factor, attracting the community to participate in the festival. People come not only seeking “wealth and prosperity” but also viewing participation in rituals as a protective act for themselves and their families against the risk and misfortune. For the people, the value of a festival is not simply determined by the accuracy of the rituals, but is also seen through the spiritual and material benefits that the festival brings. Therefore, the restructuring of organizational forms does not diminish the sanctity of the festival; rather, it contributes to the affirmation of the festival's adaptability and spread in the context of urbanization and modernization (Dương 2011: 99).

3.3.1.2 Ethnic Cultural Interactions

Initially, the festival was organized to meet the specific religious needs of the Chinese community. However, with the widespread dissemination of folk tales about Tianhou's miraculous powers, the festival gradually became a cultural-religious practice with widespread appeal among the Vietnamese people.

Tianhou Pagoda Festival today is no longer limited to the Chinese community but has become a unique cultural heritage symbol of Binh Duong province, attracting the participation of many people of different ethnic groups. While retaining distinctive cultural elements of the Chinese community, such as rituals, costumes, symbols, and folk performances, the festival has also integrated many aspects of Vietnamese culture, creating a dynamic and rich intercultural space.

This process of cultural exchange between the two communities has not only expanded the festival's scope but also created a new festival identity, one that is syncretic, open, and adaptive to the multicultural characteristics of Binh Duong society.

3.3.2. Objective Drivers

Changes in the practice of the festival in Vietnam, particularly at the

Tianhou Pagoda, have been strongly influenced by external factors, reflecting the multidimensional interaction between the state, the community, and the market within the context of globalization. In this study, three main objective groups of drivers were identified as factors driving festival change, including:

3.3.2.1 Institutionalization and State Involvement

After the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) reforms (1986), Vietnam's cultural policy underwent significant adjustments, repositioning traditional cultural elements as essential components of national heritage. In this context, folk festivals, including the Tianhou Pagoda Festival, have been actively revitalized and incorporated into the state's management framework, reflecting a global trend in "heritage politics" where traditional practices are restructured to serve national development and identity-building goals.

The State's involvement in the festival plays a dual role: it facilitates the preservation and promotion of the festival, while also challenging the authenticity of the festival as it becomes increasingly "touristized." In fact, the ritual activities of the Tianhou Festival are increasingly standardized, from the procession route and the list of participants to the approved schedule. The Binh Duong provincial government takes on the role of coordinating logistics, security, sanitation, fire prevention and fighting, and communications, thereby illustrating the strong management role of the State in organizing the event.

During the institutionalization process, the state has also promoted the "civilized, healthy, and economical" festival model, controlling spiritual content to eliminate superstitions, profiteering, and practices incompatible with modern social norms. The festival, therefore, is no longer just a religious space but has become a vehicle for achieving political-cultural goals such as promoting national unity, preserving identity, and building a national image internationally.

Legal documents such as Resolution No. 5 (VIII Session)¹¹ and

¹¹ Resolution No. 5 (VIII Session) of the Communist Party of Vietnam, adopted in 1999, mentioned the innovation and development of fields, including religion and

the Ordinance on Belief and Religion (2004)¹² have created a legal foundation for the restoration of religious life, while expanding the space for spiritual expression in the context of a market economy and global integration. In this context, the role of the State is both institutional and coordinating, having a profound influence on both the organizational form and the ritual content of festivals.

3.3.2.2 Local Branding Linked to Social Welfare and Population Stability

In the development strategy of Binh Duong New City, the festival is integrated as a “cultural brand” to connect the traditional past and the modern urbanization process, while playing a role in solving challenges related to infrastructure, transportation and population density.

In Binh Duong, demographic changes and increasingly open religious policies have promoted cultural exchanges between the Vietnamese and Chinese communities. At the same time, the principle of “non-discrimination on religion and belief” is maintained by the State as part of its strategy to build national unity. Thanks to this, the festival not only has symbolic value, but also plays a practical role in connecting the community, improving social welfare and contributing to local economic development.

3.3.2.3 The Development of Community and Spiritual Tourism

In the context of globalization and the knowledge economy, traditional festivals are increasingly being leveraged as forms of “heritagization,” where spiritual practices are restructured to align with cultural-tourism development goals. According to Decision No. 2473/QĐ-TTg dated December 30, 2011, by the Prime Minister of Vietnam approving the *Vietnam Tourism Development Strategy to 2020, with a vision to 2030*, cultural tourism, especially spiritual tourism, is identified as an important pillar (Prime Minister of Vietnam 2011). Responding to this orientation, localities have

belief, in the context of economic and social integration (Nguyen 2014).

¹² The Ordinance on Belief and Religion was passed by the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 2004, clearly regulating the right to freedom of belief and religion, religious organizations, and religious activities (National Assembly Standing Committee 2004).

proactively integrated festivals into socio-economic development programs. The Tianhou Pagoda Festival is a typical example of how national policies are realized at the local level.

In addition to spiritual value, festivals also bring economic and social value. Revenue from tourism activities can be reinvested into community welfare, reinforcing the festival's role in the sustainable development system. In the long-term strategy, the festival is expected not only to serve the local community but also to affirm Vietnam's position as a multicultural, friendly, and open country on the international map.

IV. Conclusion

The Tianhou Pagoda Festival in Binh Duong is a typical example of the restructuring process from a community-based folk festival of Chinese immigrants into a cultural heritage and tourism resource, under the direct patronage and management of the State. Research shows that the institutionalization of the festival is not only a demonstration of the national economic-cultural-social development strategy but also a reflection of the negotiation process of soft power in the management of folk cultural heritage in the modern context. The Tianhou Festival in Binh Duong shows that cultural heritage is not fixed but always moving and changing to adapt to contemporary social conditions. In that adaptation process, many traditional elements have been redefined and recreated according to the perspectives and needs of the times. Under the influence of economic development strategies, especially the rise of tourism and digital media, the festival has undergone certain adjustments to both preserve core traditional elements and meet the requirements of modernity and public appeal.

The main findings of the study include:

Tradition is dynamic and adaptable: As Hobsbawm pointed out, traditions can be "invented" or recreated to serve current objectives.

Festivals as a space for cultural and power negotiations: The

Tianhou Festival is not only a folk religious activity, but also a space where power relations and community identities are repositioned through a process of negotiation between the state, the community and relevant actors. This is where complex interactions between levels of power, from state management to grassroots community participation, take place, expressed through ritual choices, organization, and the roles of each social group.

Commercialization and the challenge of preserving authenticity: The festival simultaneously performs two seemingly opposing functions: preserving and disseminating traditional cultural values and meeting economic development goals, especially in the context of tourism. This process leads to the interweaving of traditional and modern elements, creating tension between preservation and promotion. This poses a great challenge in maintaining the authenticity, originality and spiritual depth of the festival in the context of a turbulent modern society.

The festival is a cultural negotiation space: It is a place where power relations, ethnic identities, and religious practices are negotiated, reshaped, and directed toward the future.

Increasing commercialization: While bringing economic benefits and promoting culture, this process also raises challenges in maintaining the authenticity and spiritual depth of the festival.

Cultural fusion and diversification of expressions: The incorporation of modern entertainment elements such as stage performances and multimedia presentations not only alters the appearance of the festival but also generates new forms of cultural expression, which may, however, diminish the symbolic significance of traditional elements.

Compared to similar festivals in China, Taiwan, or Malaysia, the Tianhou Festival in Binh Duong exemplifies a unique approach to "heritagizing" traditional rituals into national cultural assets. This shows that heritage preservation does not mean keeping the original form of the festival, but rather a process of deliberately selecting and integrating traditional elements into a contemporary context. Despite certain changes in terms of time of organization, rituals, participants

or offerings, the festival still maintains its core elements, thereby ensuring continuity and connection with the original cultural tradition. The flexibility in offerings, depending on circumstances and personal intentions, demonstrates the high adaptability of the festival in reconciling religious norms with social practices.

The institutionalization and commercialization of festivals also raises the issue of balanced development between conservation and development. In fact, the introduction of new elements of entertainment and technology into festivals also affects the authenticity and originality of the festival.

Based on the case study of the Tianhou Festival in Binh Duong, the study proposes some orientations in the management of intangible cultural heritage as follows:

First, it is necessary to develop a strategy that harmonizes conservation and development, ensuring the authenticity of the heritage while encouraging the active and meaningful participation of the local community, the original cultural subject of the festival.

Second, it is necessary to broaden the comparative perspective by surveying the practice of organizing the Tianhou Festival in other localities in the country and the region. This helps clarify the specificity of Binh Duong, thereby proposing institutionalization models and cultural policies suitable for each specific context.

Third, it is necessary to pay special attention to the role of the community in the conservation and development of festival heritage. Creating conditions for the community to become a participating subject, rather than just a beneficiary, is a key factor in maintaining the long-term vitality of the heritage

Thus, the Tianhou Pagoda Festival is not a fixed cultural entity, but a cultural phenomenon that is constantly in motion and reconstructed through the negotiated relationships between elements: preservation and promotion, tradition and modernity, community and state, local and global. This process not only reflects the internal dynamics of culture, but also raises important questions about cultural policy, symbolic power and the role of communities in shaping the future of heritage.

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