



## Mazu – The Chinese Sea Goddess Transforming into Mother Goddess in Vietnam Urban Areas – A Case Study at Mazu Temple in Pho Hien, Vietnam\*



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### [ *Abstract* ]

Mazu is considered the famous Chinese Sea Goddess, venerated by seafarers. Mazu belief was conducted in Meizhou County, Fujian Province. Soon worship of Mazu spread quickly to other parts of over the world, especially in Southeast Asia. In China, the Mazu belief was strongly influenced by marine culture, but its marine factors faded when Chinese immigrants had lived together with the Kinh people in Pho Hien (in the north of Vietnam) for more than four centuries. Applying the Acculturation theory, this paper aims to analyze the migration background of the Chinese and their integration into Kinh culture in Pho Hien. It can be said that historical, economic and social context, as well as native government policies have highly affected the manner and the rate of this belief's acculturation. Furthermore, the article explains the reasons for the fading of marine cultural traits and their replacement by the Kinh people's cultural factors in this belief.

**Keywords:** Acculturation, cultural assimilation, cultural integration, heritage culture, receiving culture

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## **I . Introduction**

Although Mazu received an official title in 1398 (Ptak and Cai Jiehua 2017) the Mazu worship emerged in Fujian, under the early Song (960 - 1279). Nowadays, it has spread to Guangdong, Hainan, Taiwan, Macau, Hong Kong and among the overseas peoples in Southeast Asia. This belief is not set in stone, it has evolved to accommodate local people's cultures. A large number of historical, religious, cultural academic studies have been conducted extensively on Mazu in the past two decades, particularly in the last 10 years.

Stewart and Strathern emphasized the contemporary importance of Mazu in cross-strait relations and the competitiveness of Mazu temple inside Taiwan and the Mainland of China, particularly considering China's rapidly changing economic and global strength today (Stewart and Strathern 2009). In Hong Kong, Macau, and Guangdong, Tianhou became the patron god of the village (Liu 2003). In Putian (China) the local elites played a role in the growth of the Mazu worship. It is said that the locally promoted form of goddess worship functioned at the crossroads of governmental objectives, Confucian ideology, the agency of local elites, and popular religiosity dynamics (Zhang 2020). Other research of Yanchao Zhang focuses on the role of international tourism in the creation, folklorization, and commercialization of the Mazu cult. The support of the federal and municipal governments, as well as the influence of economic globalization, have converted a traditional pilgrimage destination with a local and then national scope into a worldwide tourism magnet (Zhang 2021). Zhang stated belief in the efficacy of the sea goddess is the main driving force behind the ongoing interaction of devotees across the Strait, and a continuing commitment to unraveling personal encounters between Chinese and Taiwanese devotees will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between pilgrimage and tourism across conflicting borders (Zhang 2017).

In Vietnam, the Tianhou worship has only been interested in research for about 30 years and now most of the studies on this belief are limited to the South under the following topics: description of Tianhou temples and its rituals (Nguyen Thi Anh

Tram 2013; Phan An 2002), the transformation and acculturation of this belief (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2012; Nguyen Thi Thanh Xuyen 2008; Pham Van Tu 2011; Phan Thi Hoa Ly 2018; Tran Hong Lien 2005; Trinh Xuan Tuyet 2015), on the function of Tianhou beliefs (Trinh Xuan Tuyet 2015). The northern Chinese community is very different from the southern one in terms of migration context, historical economic and social background, and policies on management of culture, religion, and the studies of Tianhou worship are still limited so this study is meaningful for both scholar and reality.

Approaching from history and cultural anthropology perspectives, doing field work including participant observation and in-depth interview and focus group discussion, consulting previous studies, this study aims to identify and analyze the process of transformation from the Chinese Sea Goddess to Vietnamese Mother Goddess in the North of Vietnam.

## II. Mazu - The Chinese Sea Goddess

Mazu is the Chinese Sea Goddess (also known by several other names and titles Maternal Ancestor, Mother, Granny or Grandmother and Tianhou) was worshipped by very devout merchants, mariners, and fishermen.

Many Chinese history sources such as *Qing dynasty's convention* (大清會典), *Bodhisattva Legend*, *Fujian monography* and other local monographies all wrote legends about her with the basic details: Mazu was once a real woman by the name of Lin Mo, born on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 960, and died on 9<sup>th</sup> September 1119 (Lunar calendar). She lived in a small fishing village on Meizhou Island, a part of Fujian province. It was written in another legend, that she was born on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1110.

According to legends, while she was being born, a red light suddenly swooped down, dazed, and fragrant. It was said that she did not cry during birth and the whole first month afterwards; she remained a quiet and pensive child as late as four so people called her Lin Mo. Her parents also called her Moniang Princess that

meant a Silent girl. When her father and brothers were caught offshore during a typhoon her spiritual power began to save the father from drowning, but her mother roused her, causing her to drop her brother into the sea. The father returned and told the other villagers of the miracle.

A few days later, her father returned and told the other villagers of the miracle; this version of the story was preserved in murals at Fengtin in Fujian. She was not sick but died when she was 28 years old. Later, the seafarers told that they often saw her in red dress flying over the sea to save people in distress. As a result, people who lived in Meizhou Island and most sailors began to worship Mazu to pray for a favorable and peaceful sailing.

Recently, many Chinese researchers have tended to argue that Beidai district of Fujian province was the origin of Mazu legend, which is why it has the most earliest Tianhou temples with the largest number of China. Mostly, they said that Mazu was an unreal character it must be the result of the process of concretizing the Goddess identity. The fact that the water is considered a negative element, so the Sea God is also feminized. However, other legends said that Tianhou had a real prototype, specifically it was Shaman in the Beidai district (Bui Thi Thien Thai 2020: 80-81).

Initially, the Mazu was only worshipped in Beidai district of Fujian province. In 1122, on a sailing boat to South Korea as a duty of an emissary of the dynasty, Lu Yin Di was in a dangerous situation due to strong winds and big waves but was blessed peacefully by Mazu. By the way, one of the dynasty's emissaries named Li Gen who was from Beidai presented to the King the merit and miraculousness of Mazu and requested the court to grant Mazu. The cult of Mazu was approved by Emperor Huizong of Song, granted the Shun Ji Miao signboard to Mazu temple.

Since then, Mazu officially became the Chinese Sea Goddess. In the mid-thirteenth century, Fujian's trade and sea transportation was strongly developed and greatly contributed to the royal treasury. For a convenient and peaceful sailing, before and after each journey, sailors always prayed to Mazu. As a result, in order to encourage the development of sea trade, the Chinese kings crowned Mazu. From

the Song Dynasty (1156) to the Qing Dynasty (1648), the court granted a total of 36 ordinations for Mazu, her title from two words to 64 words, the status from a Lady to the highest rank of Goddess. In 1282 (Yuan Dynasty), Kublai Khan (*was a Mongolian general and statesman who was the grandson and greatest successor of Genghis Khan*) ordained Mazu to be the Goddess. In 1648, she was conferred Tianhou. Since she was ordained the Goddess, her temple quickly spread to the entire southern coast and most of China. In 1719, Tianhou was classified by the Qing dynasty as “The Three Great Sects of China”, equal to the sacrifice of Emperor and Confucius. The court also prescribed that the local officials must personally preside over the spring and the autumn ceremony, the three-kneeling and nine prostration ceremony (Bui Thi Thien Thai 2020).

During the Ming-Qing period, Chinese people migrated a lot, mainly to countries in Asia and particularly to the Southeast Asia. In their new locations they set up the congregations to worship Mazu as a place for trade activities, as well as other community activities. Mazu now had new functions such as maintenance for health, for commerce and as the home of immigrants' thoughts. Mazu is also a symbol of peace and cohesion. Countries with the largest number of Mazu temples are Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan with more than 1000 temples. Currently, in the world there are more than 6000 temples worshipping Mazu. Meizhou Island has become the mecca of more than 300 million followers from 45 countries and regions in the world (Bui Thi Thien Thai 2020). Meizhou Island and Taiwan were only separated by a narrow strait, but due to historical circumstances, the two sides had no relationship for half a century. In October 1987, tens of thousands of Mazu followers from both straits held a solemn ceremony “1000 years of Mazu ceremony” at the Meizhou temple. Many followers in Taiwan crossed the sea to make pilgrimages to Meizhou Island, despite all the bans.

In 1997, the Mazu statue of the Meizhou temple was taken to almost every temple in Taiwan from the 24<sup>th</sup> January to the 5<sup>th</sup> May, a cultural exchange activity mentioned in Taiwan history textbooks. The above events, along with the cultural exchange activities contributed significantly to the elimination of the situation of nearly

50 years of non-commercial relation between the two coasts in 2008. Because of that, Mazu was recognized the Goddess of Peace by the United Nations. On 30<sup>th</sup> September 2009, the Mazu belief was officially recognized as the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Bui Thi Thien Thai 2020).

Recently, Mazu belief has been flourishing for many different purposes such as developing tourism, enhancing international cultural exchanges, promoting Chinese culture, protecting national unity, and producing cultural products related to Mazu belief (Bui Thi Thien Thai 2020). The strong development of this belief is also evident through the constant increase in new functions for Mazu. The sixteen legends of her life show that she was not only the Sea Goddess, but also the God of irrigation, healing and eradicating evil (Taiwanese Journal 2004a).

The system of legend about her has added the function of supporting the imperial army to suppress internal turmoils, foreign invasions or conquer new lands (Taiwanese Journal 2004b). Some other documents also show that Mazu has function of the God of birth and the Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva (China Central Television 2006). According to study of Li Lu Lu, in the southern coast of China, the people worshiped her in four places: at the community temple, on boats, in the household and at the clan hall. In the past, the rituals at Mazu temple were solemnly performed by the Qing dynasty bureaucrats, while the people offered incense, prayed, and put money in the donation box. The sacrifices included chicken, duck, pig, goat and fish. In Port North, Taiwan people also hold a Mazu palanquin (add footnote) procession with two followed deities: One whose eyesight thousands of miles away and other has heard sounds in the wind. People on both sides of the streets opened the door, donated offerings, set off firecrackers, and welcomed the Goddess into the house for good things. During the procession, the palanquin usually rotated; when it arrived the temple people “went through the palanquin”.

Besides sacred rituals, the temple management board also held many different cultural activities such as the lion dance, drumming, live theater, gongs, reading the eulogy, circus, jade palanquin,

walking on stilts, offering incense, wrestling and pole climbing. Other than that, the Mazu sacrifice ceremony was organized at the end of Spring and the beginning of Autumn in which the priest was invited to worship Mazu, like at Wen Chang temple, with sacrifices offered by bureaucrats. Some places people worshipped Mazu on boats and organized dragon boat races.

In order to get on the boat to participate in the ceremony, people had to be vegetarian, washed and wear cleaned new clothes. When performing the ritual of inviting the Goddess, the head of the boat had to be in a long dress, a pink scarf, and burning incense while the boys beat the drums and gongs to invite the Goddess to the boat. In some places, people worshipped Mazu by the dragon's head (a part of the dragon boat).

During the ritual performance, people also re-enacted the event that Mazu cloned to come her mother's home in Meizhou island. In places very far from Meizhou island, people solemnly carried Mazu statues to the local congregations of Fujian or Guangdong, or to the oldest Mazu temple which was considered the "ancestral temple" to worship and the Mazu statue was left there for three days before being carried back to the local temples.

In the past, Taiwan once chose the oldest Mazu temple as the "Ancestral one" to worship. However, more recently, with an improved relationship between Taiwan and China the Taiwanese can come to worship Mazu in Meizhou Island (Liu Xi Cheng ed. 1994: 135-146).

In summary, Mazu is the Chinese Sea Goddess originated from Meizhou island, Fujian province. This belief was borne by seafarers, its rituals were related to the sea and strongly reflected the Chinese marine culture. Due to the historical, economic and political background of China, her position has been increasingly strengthened and enhanced, eventually becoming the most famous Sea Goddess in this country.

### III. Chinese in Pho Hien

Initially, Chinese traders came to live in the border areas between Vietnam and China in the third century BC. Then, sporadic migrations, or organized ones relocated in the territory of northern Vietnam. In 13<sup>th</sup> century, they mainly lived in urban areas, near ports and roads to facilitate business, in areas such as Thang Long, Pho Hien, Hai Phong, Nam Dinh.

The Chinese migrated to Pho Hien in the thirteenth century, but mostly in the seventeenth century, when Pho Hien became a busy international trading port because traders from many countries around the world such as the Netherlands, Portugal, England, France, Japan and China came here for trade. For security reasons, in 1650, the Le dynasty banned foreigners from living with the Viet people<sup>1</sup> (Kinh) (Fujiwara 2006: 98-99). Among foreigners, the Chinese accounted for a large number, so the Vietnamese court's policies were mainly aimed at the Chinese. In 1666, the court ordered that the Chinese who wanted permanent residence had to register in the Vietnamese family, and at the same time the houses, the costumes, and the hairstyle had to follow the Vietnamese style, while overseas Chinese who wanted to temporarily stay had to live in a designated residence, away from the Vietnamese (Fujiwara 2006: 98-99).

In Pho Hien, these policies enabled the Chinese to live in isolation forming a village called Bac Hoa Minh Huong. They built many congregations to employ as their own God worship, meeting places, community activities to preserve their traditional culture.

In the late seventeenth century, Pho Hien began to fade. The commercial centers gradually closed, foreign traders also left one by one but most of Chinese decided to stay here. They produced and sold some handicrafts or Chinese traditional medicine. According to the two epitaphs at Hien and Chuong Pagodas, in the early eighteenth century, several hundred Chinese families lived in Pho

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<sup>1</sup> The Viet people, also known as the Kinh is the largest population in Vietnam. In 2019, the Kinh ethnic group had 82,085,826 people, accounting for 85.32% of the national population (Ethnicity Committee - General Statistics Office 2020: 54).



Hien (Truong Huu Quynh 2006: 40-41). In the nineteenth century, Pho Hien declined more and more, merchants moved to live in big cities such as Hanoi, Hai Phong, and Nam Dinh, so the Chinese population in Pho Hien decreased significantly. During the French resistance (1946-1954), Pho Hien was heavily destroyed by bombs, which was why merchants left Pho Hien. The number of people remaining was about 200-300. Mr. X<sup>2</sup>, a Chinese Vietnamese intellectual, formerly a member of the Temple management Board for six years, said "In 1950 - 1960, there were about 200-300 Chinese in Pho Hien. After 1954, Hung Yen was destroyed, the Chinese went to other cities such as Hanoi, Hai Phong, and Nam Dinh"<sup>3</sup>. After 1954. Later, as a result of the 1979 Vietnam-China border war, almost all of the Chinese people left.

The Chinese who lived in Pho Hien had inter-married with the Vietnamese for many generations, and had almost no relatives left in China anymore. In 1992, in the old Pho Hien area, there were 18 households with 70 people of Chinese Vietnamese, No one considered Chinese (the whole area had 35,000 people) (Nguyen Dinh Nha 2006: 111). At that time, they had identified themselves as Vietnamese on their personal papers.

In 2009, when Hung Yen city was established, the old Pho Hien area was still a part of the city. In 2020, there were only 50 of Chinese Vietnamese because many of their descendants had moved to live in other places<sup>4</sup>. Because of many generations of marriage and living with the Vietnamese community, they have become Vietnamese in many aspects such as bloodline, dress, language, home affairs and customs. They have mainly worked in trade and Chinese traditional medicine, electronic repairs. Most of them cannot speak Chinese and no longer have kinship relationships in China. Their personal identity papers claimed to be the Kinh ethnicity, with some inscribing Chinese origin, or Minh Huong origin, some not.

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, the names of the interviewees are anonymous to keep their privacy.

<sup>3</sup> Interviewed Mr. X in Pho Hien on 7 August 2019.

<sup>4</sup> According to the survey result of Phan Thi Hoa Ly in Pho Hien. 2020.

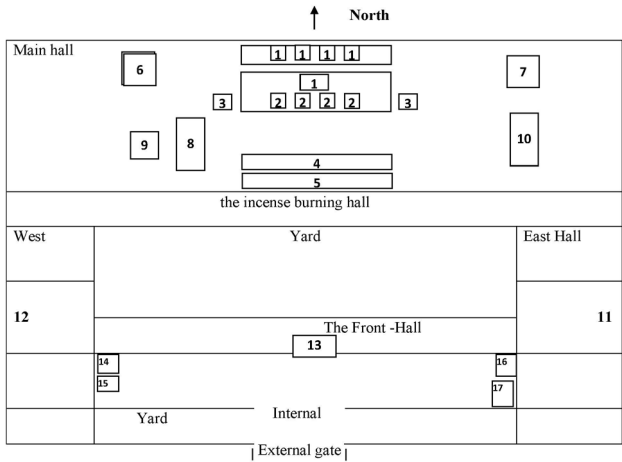
IV. Pho Hien Tianhou temple and its religious activities

4.1. The structure and layout of Mazu Temple in Pho Hien

The Tianhou temple was established in 1640 by the Chinese of Guangdong, Hainan and Fujian with some building materials and statues brought from China. In general, the temple’s architecture is in the Fujian style, but was influenced by many Vietnamese architectural elements such as Bat Trang bricks to pave the yard and wooden frames for roofing, especially the inner gate.

In the past, the language used at the temple was Chinese but Vietnamese gradually has replaced it. Since the Reform of 1986 for instance the signboard inscribed with the name of the God worshipped is in Vietnamese. The history of the temple in Vietnamese was carved on the wall in 1999. Nowadays, Tianhou’s oration and language of communication are also Vietnamese.

<Figure 1> The layout of Tianhou temple



- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. Tianhou statues  | 10. The West Alter                     |
| 2. Tianhou assistant statues  | 11. The Pantheon of Four Palaces       |
| 3. Guarding God statues   | 12. <i>Từ phủ Vạn linh</i>             |
| 4. Statues of God with eyesight thousands of miles away and heard sounds in the wind. | 13. Community altar                    |
| 5. Community altar  | 14. Worship those who have passed away |
| 6. Parent’s Tianhou statue  | 15. The Earth God                      |
| 7. King Shui Qi   | 16. Contributor Altar                  |
| 8. Statues on the West  | 17. Hoang Bua altar                    |
| 9. High bureaucrat statue   |  |

The temple's original architecture has retained the above layout, but worshipped statues have changed over time. The Earth God is Chinese Blessing God. Forms of worshipping those who have passed away, Ông Hoàng Búa also appeared after 1986. Initially, the Pantheon of Four Halls and *Tứ phủ Vạn linh*<sup>5</sup> were two separate Halls and they have changed since 1945. According to Mr. Q, a Chinese Vietnamese, over 80 years old, was born in rich and high prestigious family and he also used to be a member of the Temple Management Board, initially the temple had two main halls but there was only one main altar. Before the 1945 Revolution, people worshipped the *Tứ phủ* of heavenly region, Mountainous, River water and Geographical Areas and the *Tứ Phủ* of ToCo"<sup>6</sup>.

Two the West and the East altars set up after building two main halls: The Four Deities of the ancestors" of Chinese in the East together with "the Four Deities of Vietnamese in the West. In 1992, the temple management board worshipped the Uncle Ho statue next to Tianhou. Then, in 2018, Uncle Ho statue was moved to the other Hall to end serious controversies about worshipping Uncle Ho with God. Now, the deities of *Tứ phủ* belief such as Ancestral Deity and



<Photo 1> Sacred Four Halls (Tứ phủ Vạn linh)

Taken by Phan Thị Hoa Lý on 19 February 2019

<sup>5</sup> A Vietnamese belief - the four kingdoms of Ten Thousand Spirit.

<sup>6</sup> Interviewed Mr. Q on 2 February 2019.

Dragon King are worshipped in the main hall of the temple. The “Sacred Four Halls” (see: photo 1) worships eight female statues and the three plaques of the Third Blessed One, the Fifth Venerable God and the Venerable Heavenly God of the Three Areas. On the altar there are also two paper hats with a Rahu's face and votive items.

The Four Deity Hall [see photo 2] has worshipped four women statues in four different colors of dress (blue, red, yellow, white). The Temple Guard and some Chinese-Vietnameses confirmed these were the four Ancestral Ladies of four Chinese clans including: Lam clan (dressed in white), Ly (in blue shirt), Quach (in light yellow shirt, Hoang (red shirt).

In this hall, it can see votive offerings and decorations with *worshipped hat (nón công đồng)* (*Tứ phủ* belief), pale white snake double on the ceiling and couplets presenting the Four Duchess:

*Four Duchess of the Goddess*

*Always with her no matter the Spring, the Summer,  
the Autumn or the Winter*



<Photo 2> Four Duchess of the Goddess  
Taken by Phan Thị Hoa Lý on 25 May 2008



<Photo 3> Contributor Altar

Taken by Phan Thị Hoa Lý on 18 February 2019



<Photo 4> Tianhou Altar

Taken by Phan Thị Hoa Lý on 18 February 2019

#### 4.2. Temple Ritual

Before 1945, this temple was completely managed by Chinese, so they carried out rituals twice a year on the birthday of Tianhou (23<sup>rd</sup> March of lunar calendar) and the date of death (9<sup>th</sup> September of lunar calendar). The ritual is described as "seven big and rich clans

prepared vegetable and meat offerings, at the beginning of the ceremony local officials and members of seven clans prayed to Mazu for happiness, health, and prosperity. The management board assigned ten or twelve girls in Chinese traditional costumes to line up one to make an offering and the others to receive the offering to the altar. Then Ritual Board prayed the Mazu<sup>7</sup>.

Normally, one ceremony has 10-12 offering trays, and the head of the temple is responsible for making the opening ceremony's speech in Chinese. After making the speech he releases a bunch of balloons tied with a silk ribbon that has chanted a spell. It is said that since then, in the ceremony, the Chinese dress in robes like the Vietnamese<sup>8</sup>.

"In the past, offerings were roasted pigs, boiled chickens, sewn meat. Especially, the Ritual on 9<sup>th</sup> September, offerings were frozen meat, white sticky rice, different seasonal fruits. People also offered Suzhou cakes, jelly seaweed, rice, sesame salt because of the magic carpentry like a sesame tree!"<sup>9</sup>. Most of these dishes were Chinese cuisine and Suzhou cake was a specialty of the Fujian people so they made sacrifice her"<sup>10</sup>. Nowadays, besides Chinese dishes, offerings are also Vietnamese dishes such as boiled chicken and sticky rice.

On the occasion of the ritual on March 23 of year, the Chinese held a procession on the afternoon. The procession is a tour around Bac Hoa village. On the way, the procession stops at each village's temple to celebrate. Every 5 years, the village held a huge festival with a solemn procession (Le Hong Ly 1999).

To organize and maintain religious activities at the temple, the Chinese elected a Management Board who were responsible for raising funds and calling for material contributions from their own community. Mr. Q mentioned "The temple fund was contributed by the Chinese that was only spent on the worship while management board were not paid, they worked with charity. The temple's fund was not much. The temple management board was elected by the

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<sup>7</sup> Interviewed Mr. Q at his home in Pho Hien on 19 February 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Interviewed Mr. P, a Chinese Vietnamese, a member of Temple management Board since 1986, at the temple on 25 May 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Interviewed Mr. Q at his home in Pho Hien on 19 February 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Interviewed Mr. Q at his home in Pho Hien on 19 February 2019.

Chinese including a head, a deputy of Congregation, a secretary, a treasurer. The management board were responsible for taking care of the temple and organized rituals". On the occasion of the old festival, "the elders used to play the traditional games (*tổ tôm, đánh chắn*), chess, and chicken fights. They also invited people from other provinces volunteering to perform the Chinese traditional theatre because Hung Yen had no artist"<sup>11</sup>.

After the August 1945 revolution, the Chinese temples were directly managed by Vietnamese Ward level government. However, the government only managed in legal terms, while the Chinese still directly organized religious activities at the temple. Before organizing the festival or renovating the temple, the Temple Management Board has to apply for permission to send to the ward People's Committee and they also manage the funding for the activities of the temple

During the French and American resistances (1945-1954 ; 1954 - 1975) religious activities were not allowed to organize and Tianhou Temple was no exception. "During this period, a Kinh man stayed in the temple. He earned by drawing patterns, or portraits decorated on plates on enamel plates brought to Hai Duong for baking"<sup>12</sup>. It was said by Mr. X "Around the year 1945 – 1954, three Vietnamese families lived in two side halls of the temple, and they were required to leave (by the local government) in 1992 when the temple was recognized as a Historical - Cultural Heritage<sup>13</sup>. During this period, the relationship between Vietnam - China was very close, so the Chinese and Vietnamese people in Pho Hien were quite friendly with each other. There was no distinction, which is why a Vietnamese could live in the Chinese temple and voluntarily take care of the daily worship and cleaning the temple. However, the Vietnam-China relationship began to fall into dispute when US President Nixon officially visited and signed the Shanghai Joint Declaration in 1972. Finally, the Vietnam – China border war broke the two countries' relationship in 1979, causing almost all Chinese to leave Pho Hien. The remaining people lived quite self-consciously. They hardly went to the temples or pagodas.

<sup>11</sup> Interviewed Mr. Q at his home in Pho Hien on 19 February 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Interviewed Mr. Q at his home in Pho Hien on 19 February 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Interviewed Mr. X in Pho Hien on 14 April 2019.

Thanks to Renovation (Doi Moi, 1986), along with the promulgation of many policies on socio-economic development, the Vietnam Government also launched many regulations on freedom of religion and religious festivals. The Vietnam-China relationship also gradually reduced tensions and was normalized in 1991. Some Chinese people thought about restoration their temples. During this period, Chinese were also allowed to directly manage and organize religious and religious activities at their temples.

They then elected a management board consisting of a Head of the Committee, two Deputy Chiefs, a Treasurer and a Lady of the incense. These four people belong to four Chinese clans: On, Ly, Quach and Hoang. They were clans of high socio-economic status in the community. Mr. Q (one of the four people above) talked about the way they restored Tianhou ritual "The management board issued a notice that said Tianhou temple was recognized by the government, it had a Management Board which is responsible for inviting guests to attend the ritual. Then the Management Board communicates to the children and Chinese households who used to live in Pho Hien or relatives and acquaintances everywhere such as Hai Phong, Thai Binh, Nam Dinh, Hai Duong, Hanoi ... "14.

In 1987, the Tianhou ritual was restored for the first time. This restoration has been particularly strong since the temple was recognized as a National Historical Cultural heritage by the Ministry of Information Culture (Vietnam) according to Decision No. 3959 signed by the Minister Tran Hoan, dated 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1992 and shortly thereafter by Pho Hien International, held on 10-12<sup>th</sup> December 1992. The conference attracted researchers from around the world. Since then, the temple has been managed by the City Department of Culture and Information and the Ward Vice Chairman took the role of the Head of the Ritual Board. The local government has managed the activities of the temple, and also provided funding for restoration. The Vietnamese started to join the Temple Management Board.

Since its restoration, at the beginning of the ceremony, a Government Representative makes a speech in Vietnamese, and

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<sup>14</sup> Interviewed Mr. Q at private house in Pho Hien on 19 February 2019.



then sets off fireworks. The ritual is also increasingly performed according to the Vietnamese style that includes six steps of worship offerings incense, flower, candle, tea, fruit, rice. Studies on this ritual in the late 1990s showed that Vietnamese dishes are popular, with offerings such as sticky rice, green bean sweet soup, rice nuggets, persimmons, lychees, Gac cake, pigs, chickens, carp, goats, and geese, then boiled pork, chicken, and ducks (Le Hong Ly 1999: 72; Nguyen Phuc Lai 1998: 58).

The Chinese traditional offerings also are getting lost. Nowadays, the Tianhou ritual's offerings no longer include foods such as roasted pork, Caramelized pork, tortoise shaped cake and Suzhou cake. On the occasion of September 9, 2019 lunar festival, it recognized offerings such as fruit, betel nut, cakes, *bánh dày* and a vegetarian tray at Tianhou altar; Community worship (*Ban Công đồng*) altar had boiled chicken, pork bologna and carnism diet tray; At *Thổ Công*, *ông Hoàng Búa* and *Tứ phủ vãn linh* altars all have meatarian diet trays; *Ban Tứ vị tổ cô* had a vegetarian tray (see photos 5, 6, 7, 8, 9).



<Photo 5> Offerings at Ban Tứ phủ vãn linh altar on the ritual on September 9, Lunar Calendar

Taken by Phan Thị Hoa Lý on 7 October 2019



<Photo 6> Offerings at *Ban Tít phũ Tổ cồ* altar on the ritual on September 9 Lunar Calendar  
Taken by Phan Thị Hoa Lý on 7 October 2019



<Photo 7> *Ban Mưa hậu* altar on the ritual on 9<sup>th</sup> September Lunar Calendar  
Taken by Phan Thị Hoa Lý on 7 October 2019



<Photo 8> Ban Hoàng Búa altar on the ritual on 9<sup>th</sup> September Lunar Calendar  
Taken by Phan Thị Hoa Lý on 7 October 2019



<Photo 9> Ban Thổ thần altar on the ritual on September 9 Lunar Calendar  
Taken by Phan Thị Hoa Lý on 7 October 2019

The Tianhou temple's ritual has been transformed dramatically since 2000. In 2002 when the movie "My Fair Princess", a very popular Chinese film was shown in Vietnam, Mr. P had the idea that "A Chinese temple must be different from a Vietnamese one, ritual costumes, and processions have to be in the Chinese style". He discussed it with the Temple Management Board, who then presented it to the authorities. With the approval of the government, Mr. P went to Hanoi to order ten dresses, hats and shoes like the costumes of the female characters in the above-mentioned movie. That year's ritual, the new outfits were widely praised, so after that, the management board bought more female and male outfits for the ritual<sup>15</sup>. Some of the people who carried the Tianhou palanquin wore this costume, while most of them still wore the Vietnamese costume. This costume has been not only worn on Tianhou ritual but has also been lent to other temples since 2012.

*Tứ phủ Vạn linh* has often carried out votive dance which is the most prominent ritual of Đạo Mẫu influenced on Tianhou ritual since 2000. The congregations have also held light, flag, bow and sword dances as offerings to Mazu.

In 2014, the temple was recognized as "Special National Monument" according to Decision No. 2408 / QĐ-TTg, signed by Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung on 31 December 2014. This title is given to a complex of sixteen monuments (both Chinese and Vietnamese) of special historical, architectural and artistic value (Minh Ngan, Phuong Thu 2018). The Hung Yen Provincial People's Committee issued Decision No. 2156/QĐ-UBND on the establishment of a National Monuments Management Board, which has been run by the People's Committee of Hung Yen city since November 2017. All members of the Board are employees of the People's Committee and receive salaries from the State. Every year, the Board plans activity budget including money to buy offerings, organizing ritual, expenses of electricity, water, internet, security guards, incense etc. It is approved by the Provincial People's Committee.

The Temple management Board organizes all temple activities.

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<sup>15</sup> Interviewed Mr. P. at the temple on 24 May 2008.

They decide how the ritual will be held and who will be invited to attend the ritual. They also invite employees of agencies, companies and local social organizations to take part in the ritual to strengthen community cohesion. The management board prepare all the offerings, assign the person to write and make the opening speech and invited Ritual Master. The day before the ritual, the board takes care of space for guests, setting up tables and chairs and assign a person who is responsible for recording the name of people contributing fund to temple activity budget. The board also appoints some staff to welcome pilgrims and even prepare gifts (usually sweets) to give back to those who come to the ceremony and make merit for the temple. This gift is considered as a reward from Tianhou that brings good luck to the recipient. In general, all work of rituals are undertaken by the Management Board; therefore, it is considered the agent and owner of the temple. Chinese people who could voluntarily participate in the temple's affairs as owners now become guests. A Chinese woman said: "In the past, the city government did not manage the temple activities, so I considered those my housework, so I had to invite people to attend the ceremony. Now it is put under of the City government control, having the Management Board to take care of everything, they only invite state organizations and companies. For local people, they just announce about the ritual on the loudspeaker"<sup>16</sup>.

On the full moon and the first day of every month, a member of the Board makes offerings to Tianhou.

In the period when the Chinese people completely owned the temple (before 1945), annually, besides two occasions of birth day and transformation of Tianhou, the temple also had the following festivals: Full Moon January (January 15 in lunar calendar). Doan Ngo (May 5 lunar calendar), the full moon of July (July 15 of the lunar calendar), Mid-Autumn Festival (August 15 of the lunar calendar) and the Year end, New Year's Eve. During the Mid-Autumn Festival, they held a full moon ceremony, party and released flower lanterns. "When the Chinese managed the temple,

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<sup>16</sup> Interviewed Ms. V, a Vietnamese Chinese woman, at her home in Pho Hien on 19 February 2019.

on the Mid-Autumn Festival, they set up a temporary lake on both sides of the middle hall to release the flower lanterns”<sup>17</sup>.

At the end of the year, they held the year-end and New Year's Eve ceremonies “The Chinese hung lanterns and decorative cord and held New-Year's Eve ceremony”<sup>18</sup>. During this period, the Chinese people gave up organizing the Cold Food Festival (3<sup>rd</sup> March of the lunar calendar) which was an important traditional ceremony and integrated *Doan Ngo Tết* ( May 5 of lunar calendar) of the Vietnamese “No longer the Cold Food Ceremony, Adding *Tết Doan Ngo* on May 5 with offerings such as glutinous rice wine, fruits, traditional cakes”<sup>19</sup>.

Since 2000, Tianhou Temple strongly has integrated deeply the Vietnamese Mother Worship and its two typical “*attendant service*” rituals are annually hold “in and out the summer”. Mr.X, a Chinese - Vietnamese member of Board for 16 years stated “In the past, the people didn't hold ritual “in and out the summer”; they just simply worshiped. Since 2005, many groups have come to hold these two rituals and then hold *attendant service ceremony*”<sup>20</sup>.

When the National Heritage Management Board was set up, they wrote the Ritual Timeline of the temple (see photo 10), including Temple door opening ceremonies on January 8, March 22; March 23 and September 9 traditional festivals; March 24 Thanksgiving ceremony; April 8 ceremony in summer; July 18 the out summer ceremony; December 23 of the year-end ceremony. According to this timeline, the temple no longer has the ritual of worshipping the full moon of January, *Doan ngo*, the full moon of July, the mid-autumn festival and the New Year's Eve. These rituals are not set in stone, but they evolve to accommodate changing needs. Some Vietnamese rituals have been conducted “in the summer” (*vào hè*), “out the summer” (*ra hè*). Thus, two of the eight Tianhou rituals of the Chinese people have been conducting, four others are replaced by four Vietnamese rituals among *Vào hè* and

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<sup>17</sup> Interviewed Mr. K, a Vietnamese temple keeper, at the temple on 18 February 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Interviewed Mr. Q at his home in Pho Hien on 19 February 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Interviewed Mr. X, in Pho Hien on 1 April 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Interviewed Mr. X, in Pho Hien on 1 April 2019.

*Ra hè* are typical rituals of the Kinh people's *Tứ phủ* belief. It is said that the National Monument Management Board has conducted the Kinh people's rituals that created a major turning point in the process of Vietnamizing the belief of Tianhou worship in Pho Hien.



TT	NGÀY	NỘI DUNG
1	Ngày mùng 8 tháng 1	Lễ mở cửa đền
2	Ngày 22 tháng 3	Lễ mở cửa đền
3	Ngày 23 tháng 3	Lễ hội truyền thống (Kỷ niệm ngày sinh của Mẫu)
4	Ngày 24 tháng 3	Lễ tạ
5	Ngày 8 tháng 4	Lễ vào hè
6	Ngày 18 tháng 7	Lễ ra hè
7	Ngày 9 tháng 9	Lễ hội truyền thống (Kỷ niệm ngày hòa của Mẫu)
8	Ngày 23 tháng 12	Lễ tất niên

Ban Quản lý khu di tích quốc gia đặc biệt Mẹ Hiền

<Photo 10> Ritual timeline has been set up since the early of 2018  
Taken by Phan Thị Hoa Lý on 18 October 2019

## V. Tianhou - The Mother goddess in urban Vietnam

In China, this Sea Goddess was often called Mazu (the Mother) but the Goddess was named Tianhou in Pho Hien that's why two temples' name boards written "Tianhou Temple". In the past, people used to call Tianhou temple, but over time, this belief has integrated with Vietnamese local beliefs in particular the Mother worship. Therefore, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, it appeared the name "*Đền Mẫu*" (Mother Temple) and it has become more and more popular. The Tianhou worshipping altar is also called Mother's Altar.

Goddess belief appeared in the Vietnamese prehistoric period and was historicized and royalized through the deification of Feudal dynasties that made a large number of typical goddesses become Mother Goddess. This belief absorbed Chinese Taoism to form the *Tam phủ, Tứ phủ* belief in the fifteenth century. The Vietnamese historical context made this belief strongly developed and become the unique and typical belief of the country that identify the musical characteristics, costumes, dances of many ethnic groups in Vietnam. Thus, it was also recognized as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in December 2016.

*Tam phủ, Tứ phủ* belief has a consistent temple system with its primitive worldview and a large number of legends, myths and rituals. Its temple basically consists of the gods from high to low as follows: *Phật Bà Quan Âm* (the Bodhisattva) - Jade Emperor - Mother *Tam phủ, Tứ phủ* - Five great priests (from the Fifth to the Tenth) – *Tứ vị chầu bà* (four assistants) – *Ngũ vị Hoàng tử* (the Five Princes (call from the order of the First to the Fifth but there are from Fifth to Tenth Mr. Hoang) – *Thập Nhị vương cô* (Ten Princess, call the order from the the First to the Tenth) – *Thập nhị vương cậu* ( the Ten Princes, call from the First to the Tenth) – *Ngũ hổ* (Five Tigers) – *Ông Lót* (snake) (Ngo Duc Thinh 2010: 61-62).

*Tam phủ* includes *Thiên phủ* (Heavenly domain) symbolized by *Mẫu Thượng Thiên* (the Heavenly Mother) in a red dress; *Địa phủ* (the Land) symbolized by *Mẫu Địa* in a yellow costume; *Thoải phủ* (Water domain) symbolized by *Mẫu Thoải* in white dress. *Tam phủ* emerged first, then developed into *Tứ phủ*, adding more *Nhạc phủ* (Forest area) symbolized by *Mẫu Thượng Ngàn* in blue dress. *Tam phủ, Tứ phủ* belief has strongly developed since early 21<sup>st</sup> century leading to the explosion of the *Hầu đồng* ritual which has been performed in temples, pagodas, communal houses and shrines of the Kinh people and religious temples of other ethnic groups such as Hoa, Khmer, Tay, Nung and some ethnic groups in the Central Highlands. This assimilation transformed Tianhou's worship and ritual into the Kinh people's *Tam phủ, Tứ phủ* rituals.

The Tianhou temple was built in the middle of the seventeenth century (1640) and absorbed strongly *Tứ phủ*



Vietnamese belief in the middle of the twentieth century (around 1945). The two former worshipping halls were replaced by two palaces (*Tứ phủ Vạn linh* and *Tứ phủ Châu Bà*),. *Tứ phủ vạn linh* meant that “the innumerable (one thousand) goddesses in the four regions”, worshipping *Đệ Tam*, *Đức Ông*, *Đệ Ngũ* *Đức Ông* and *Thượng Thiên Đức Ông*, the eight female statues (the Deities of the Twelve Goddesses), a Tiger on the floor and a pair of snakes on the rafters are all gods in *Tứ phủ* Vietnamese belief. A Chinese - Vietnamese who used to be a member of the temple management board insisted that “*Tứ phủ châu bà* were Ancestors of four Chinese clans who built the temple”<sup>21</sup>. *Tứ phủ châu bà* statues worshipped in the Tianhou Temple showed that the Chinese either accidentally or intentionally legitimized the worship of their four ancestors as *Tứ phủ*. Mr.X said: “When I was about 5-6 years old (he was born around 1940 - P.T.H.L), the temple worshipped four ancestors and held *lên đồng* (homophobic) ritual. *Tứ phủ vạn linh* organised many homophobic rituals to invite *Liễu Hạnh*, *cô Bơ*, *hoàng Mười*”<sup>22</sup>. And Mr. Q explained “Chinese worshipped *Tứ phủ vạn linh* in Tianhou temple because of their changed worldview”<sup>23</sup>. It was easy to recognize the Chinese immigrants actively adopted the Vietnamese culture in a favorable context that positively impacted on them, and this case was true of acculturation (Berry 2005; Richmond 1993).

Integrating the Kinh's *Tứ phủ* belief into Tianhou temple, the Chinese also created another corresponding temple to worship their goddesses. The fact that Tianhou was a virgin girl, the Chinese community selected four unmarried girls from four prestigious clans such as Lam, Ly, Quach, Hoang to worship as Tianhou's followers. Because of that, over the centuries, the temple custodians are members of these four clans.

In the temple, worshipping the four young Lady statues dressed in blue, red, white and yellow costumes, tiger worship and decorated with worshipped hats and a pair of yellow and green snakes wrapped on two beams of the building represent the Kinh's *Tứ phủ* temple. The people called *Tứ phủ Tổ cô* or *Tứ phủ châu bà*.

<sup>21</sup> Interviewed Mr. X on 12 April 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Interviewed Mr. X in Pho Hien on 12 April 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Interviewed Mr. Q on 19 February 2019.

However, some Chinese-Vietnamese people who used to be members of the temple management board affirmed that "*Tứ phủ châu bà* are ancestors of the four Chinese clans who have contributed to establish the temple"<sup>24</sup>. This ambiguity shows that the Chinese have unintentionally or intentionally legalized their ancestors in the form of *Tứ phủ* belief that marked a very strong influence of the Kinh *Tứ phủ* worship on the Tianhou worship in Pho Hien since the mid-twentieth century.

*Tổ cô*, *Cô tổ* or *Bà cô tổ*, *Bà cô*, also known as a virgin girl and died at a very young age at sacred hours, so she was very sacred and fierce. She could harm people if they did not make offerings to her, but she also loved children, helped them stay healthy, eat well, and grow up quickly. Similarly, to *Cô tổ*, Mr. Manh is an unmarried male teenager who was sacred too and was willing to help people. *Bà cô* and uncle Manh are often worshiped separately at a small altar, placed below the Ancestor altar. Worshiping *Bà cô* and Mr. Manh is a typical Vietnamese belief. The fact that the Chinese legalize *Bốn Bà cô* worship and called *Tứ phủ Tổ cô* shows that they were strongly influenced by the Kinh's *Tứ phủ* belief.

Since the mid-twentieth century, the Tianhou temple has absorbed more and more Vietnamese local beliefs that related to historical context. Firstly, during the time of Vietnamese domination, the French colonial government gave the Chinese many political and economic priorities, they became rich and powerful, and they actively absorbed the Vietnamese *Tứ phủ* belief to integrate well with the Vietnamese and fulfill their spiritual needs. Secondly, for 17 years of unification within 7 years of renovation, Vietnam gained economic achievements, then it had conditions to pay attention to cultural heritage, so Tianhou Temple was recognized as a National Historical Cultural Heritage (by the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture). However, after the 1979 Vietnam-China border war, most of the Chinese left Pho Hien; the rest had to self- identify as Vietnamese and had a lower social status than the Kinh people so that the Kinh were able to participate directly in the management and administration of temple affairs<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> Interviewed Mr. X at Pho Hien on 12 April 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Interviewed Mr. Q on 23 March 2019.

At that time, the temple management board worshipped the Uncle Ho statue in the main hall “Uncle Ho statue was worshipped in Temple in 1992 by its popularity” (the Management Board’s explanation)<sup>26</sup>. They also worshipped *Hoàng Búa*, *Mua hậu*, *Ban Các cụ quy*. Regarding the origin of the *Hoàng Búa* belief, Mr. X, a Chinese - Vietnamese, used to be a member of the Temple Management Board in 1996 assumed “*Hoang Búa* was worshipped in 1996. It couldn’t identify who he was but it could propose he was definitely Assistant god of Tianhou”<sup>27</sup>. Furthermore, Mr. Q assumed that “*Hoàng Búa* was a Vietnamese superstition, *chúa Thượng Ngàn* with *Ông Hoàng* may be worshiped by Mr. P when he was a temple manager”<sup>28</sup>. The fact that *Hoàng Búa* worshipping space (photo 8) was decorated *nón công đồng* (a worshipped hat of *Tứ phủ* belief), offerings including votive papers, vegetarian and meatatarian meal trays cooked in Vietnamese style identify Hoang Bua as a deity of the *Tứ phủ* belief. *Ban Các cụ quy* worships people who took care of the temple passed away from 1987 to now. *Mua hậu* worships people who had no sons or were unmarried and they had contributed a sum of money or land according to the village's regulations so that, after their death, they would be worshiped at the temple.

More and more Vietnamese have become members of the Tianhou temple management board while Chinese members have been involved less and less, and the last two Chinese members were advised to give up due to their old age and weakness in 2012. Since then, the rituals and offerings have become more and more Vietnamese. Since the special National Monument Management Board has managed and organized the Tianhou ritual in a new way, the Chinese have rarely come to see the temple; only their descendants who live far away visit the temple when they come home. For the Vietnamese “they usually come to Tianhou temple”<sup>29</sup>.

Tianhou’s Sea Goddess function has also transformed into a Mother Goddess and absorbed functions of the Avalokiteshvara

<sup>26</sup> interviewed Mr. X on 12 April 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Interviewed Mr. X on 8 May 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Interviewed with Mr. Q on 23 March 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Interviewed Mr. X at Pho Hien on 12 April 2019

Bodhisattva and Goddess in Urban Vietnam. People come to Tianhou temple to pray for health, peace, good business, promotion, passing exams, even exorcism. Tianhou 's offerings has been vegetarian since 2018.

Tianhou's death anniversary, a Vietnamese priest was invited to carry out the ritual and women have been responsible for organizing the ritual as Vietnamese Goddess one since 2000.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The Chinese from the southern coast of China and the Vietnamese are so similar in race, history, and culture that it was not difficult for them to integrate into Vietnamese society as the Second homeland in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The fact that for nearly four centuries living with the Vietnamese, socio-historical events, especially Vietnam-China diplomatic relations, the Chinese community in Pho Hien, depending on each context, have been integrating into Vietnam society actively or passively. They also have mixed blood with Vietnamese people for many generations that makes acculturation between the Chinese quickly and smoothly. The border war of 1979 made most Chinese leave Vietnam and they were far lower in status. The number of Chinese who stayed in Pho Hien identified themselves as Vietnamese and no longer related to relatives in China. Nowadays it can be said that this community has been Vietnamized in terms of language, clothes, housing, customs, habits and culture.

Tianhou worship is a Chinese popular belief representing their cultural identity. However, the continuous process of acculturation with Vietnamese folk beliefs, socio- historical events have transformed Tianhou worship into the Pho Hien Goddess belief which are totally different from Tianhou belief in China. It can be said that the transformation a Chinese famous sea goddess into a Vietnamese Mother Goddess has been completed.

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