Interdisciplinary Journal of Religious and Multicultural Perspectives

https://ijrmp.com
editor@ijrmp.com
Volume 2, Issue 1
March, 2026
Pages: 18-31

The Worship of Ong Bon at Phuoc AN Temple, Thu Dau Mot Ward, Ho Chi Minh City: Ritual Procedures and Symbolic Significance

To Huynh Anh Tuan[1], Đang Hoang Lan[2], Bui Thi Ngoc Phuong[3]

[1]PhD Candidate in Vietnamese Studies, Hong Bang International University, Vietnam

[2]Deputy Director of the Center for Religious and Ethical Studies, Lecturer at the Department of Anthropology, Vietnam

[3]Gia Dinh University, Vietnam

E-Mail: tohuynhanhtuan.artist@gmail.com

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18942507

Abstract

This article examines the ritual process of the worship of Ong Bon at Phuoc An Temple, Thu Dau Mot Ward, Ho Chi Minh City, with a focus on interpreting the symbolic meanings of ritual practices. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and in-depth interviews, the study documents and analyzes activities performed during the festival, such as sedan chair shaking, touch statue, passing beneath the sedan chair and ritual chants. Grounded in Victor Turner's theories of ritual and symbolism and Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology, the findings demonstrate that each ritual embodies distinct layers of meaning, ranging from divine - human communion and the seeking of blessings to the reaffirmation of collective belief. Accordingly, the worship of Ong Bon is not merely a form of religious practice but also a distinctive mode of cultural expression, reflecting the adaptive transformation of Chinese religious traditions in the Southern Vietnamese context.

Keywords: *Ong Bon; Binh Duong; Religious Beliefs; Chinese Community*

1. Introduction

When migrating to Vietnam, the Chinese people brought with them a cultural repertoire that included customs and practices, among which religious and ritual activities played a central role. The deities they venerated became repositories of faith, enabling them to settle and make a living, while also serving as moral benchmarks that guided ethical conduct wherever they resided.

Similar to the Vietnamese worship of village tutelary spirits (Thanh hoang) or the Khmer veneration of Neak Tà, the Chinese community worships Ong Bon. The term Bon in Chinese (本) means "root" or "origin," and Ong Bon, also known as Bon Dau Cong (本頭公), refers here to ancestral figures or pioneering leaders who rendered meritorious service to the community. Ong Bon is primarily symbolic rather than a specific historical figure; depending on each Chinese community, this figure is conceptualized in different ways. For example, most Chinese communities identify Ong Bon with Phuoc Duc Chanh Than (福德正神), whereas the Chinese in Cholon, Ho Chi Minh City, conceptualize Ong Bon as Zhou Daguan, and the Teochew Chinese in Tra Vinh identify Ong Bon as Zheng He (Dang, 2014). In Thu Dau Mot Ward (formerly Thu Dau Mot City, Binh Duong Province; since July 2025, Ho Chi Minh City, Binh Duong Province, and Ba Ria - Vung Tau Province have been administratively merged under the name Ho Chi Minh City), the Fujian-origin Lĭ (李)lineage of the Chinese community established Phuoc An Temple to worship Ong Bon, concretized as That Phu Dai Nhan (七府大人) - seven human deities regarded as the progenitors of seven lineages. In the Thu Dau Mot area, apart from the Mazu festival, which is considered the largest festival in the region, the Phuoc An Temple Festival - although originally confined to a single lineage and a localized community - has, over time, gained increasing prominence and attracted a growing number of pilgrims. Most visitors come due to their belief in narratives concerning the sacred efficacy of Ong Bon, while others are drawn by the opportunity to witness distinctive ritual practices such as sedan chair shaking, spirit possession, and Daoist ritual performances. Through this process, the festival has gradually affirmed the role and cultural value of Ong Bon worship, not only for the Chinese community but also for the local population more broadly.

Based on ethnographic field observations at Phuoc An Temple, several issues can be raised that warrant further clarification: why does the community continue to maintain and reenact ritual behaviors such as touching the statue, passing beneath the sedan chair, sedan chair shaking, and chanting slogans within the festival space? What symbolic meanings do these practices hold for ritual participants, and how do they contribute to the construction of belief and perceptions of sacredness? Furthermore, through direct participation and embodied interaction with the deity, do these rituals render a fundamentally sacred belief system more familiar and secularized, or, conversely, do they reaffirm and intensify the sense of the sacred in community life?

At present, studies on Ong Bon worship in Thu Dau Mot remain limited, with most research confined to descriptive accounts and lacking in-depth analysis of the meanings embedded in the ritual system. Meanwhile, each action within the ritual process contains layers of symbolic meaning that reflect the beliefs, aspirations, and identity of the community. Addressing this gap, the present study seeks to identify the distinctive features of Ong Bon worship at Phuoc An Temple through an analysis of the symbolic meanings of ritual practices, thereby contributing to a clearer understanding of an important component of the cultural and spiritual life of the Chinese community in Southern Vietnam.

2. Research Methodology

This study is conducted through a combination of documentary research and ethnographic fieldwork. Reports and previous studies on Ong Bon worship and the religious practices of the Chinese community are collected to establish a theoretical foundation and provide a basis for comparative analysis. Fieldwork is carried out at Phuoc An Temple through participant observation and in-depth interviews with ritual practitioners, members of the temple management committee, and local participants. The collected data are analyzed from the perspective of symbolic anthropology, drawing in particular on the theoretical frameworks of Clifford Geertz (1973) and Victor Turner (1967, 1969), in order to interpret the symbolic meanings and social roles of rituals in community life.

Geertz and Turner argue that rituals, symbols, and religious discourse function as means through which communities construct, share, and reproduce cultural meanings. According to Victor Turner, "ritual

is a complex of symbols, and the symbol is the smallest unit of ritual." (Turner, 1967:19). He argues that ritual symbols operate on three levels of meaning: (1) manifest meaning, referring to what is directly perceived and explicitly presented in the ritual; (2) latent meaning, referring to what is perceived peripherally and associated with other rituals as well as with the practical contexts of social action; and (3) hidden meanings, referring to what subjects are entirely unconscious of, which are linked to unintentional experiences shared among participants and, more broadly, with humanity as a whole (Turner, 1975:176). Geertz argues that culture is a system of webs of meaning constructed by human beings, within which rituals and religious beliefs operate as symbols that reflect and communicate the values of the community (Geertz, 1973:5).

3. Research Results

3.1. Context and Overview of Phuoc An Temple

The Chinese community began settling in the former Binh Duong region in the late seventeenth century. These early settlers belonged to the group of Chinese refugees known as the "anti-Qing, pro-Ming" migrants, who were permitted by the Nguyen Lords to reside in Cu Lao Pho (present-day Dong Nai) before gradually moving into several areas of Binh Duong, particularly the region around Thu Dau Mot, which constituted an ideal settlement area during the early phase of land reclamation. According to historical records, Phu Cuong early emerged as a focal point attracting Chinese migrants, as it functioned as the central marketplace of the region at the time, benefiting from convenient transportation by both land and waterways and a relatively secure legal environment. This area was especially attractive to Fujian-origin Chinese skilled in ceramics, as the local soil was rich in kaolin, providing favorable conditions for pottery production (Binh Duong Association of Historical Sciences, 2012:32-34).

The formation of cultural and religious institutions of the Chinese community in Binh Duong is manifested through the establishment of worship sites. Prior to the nineteenth century, no Chinese worship facilities had been established in Thu Dau Mot. From the late nineteenth century onward, as the number of Chinese migrants to the area increased, growing prosperity fostered the development of cultural and religious institutions. Notable among these were the establishment of Thien Hau Temple at Rach Huong Chu Hieu in Phu Cuong in 1867, and two Ong Bon worship sites: Phuoc An Temple, founded in 1882 and concretized as *That Phu Dai Nhan*, and Phuoc Vo Dien, established in 1885 and concretized as *Pak Tai* (Binh Duong Association of Historical Sciences, 2012:57-58).

Phuoc An Temple (福安廟) originates from Anxi, Quanzhou, Fujian Province, China. According to a horizontal plaque preserved in the temple, its establishment dates to 1906. However, based on accounts from local elders, the temple existed earlier in a more rudimentary form, initially constructed from wooden planks at a different location, before being relocated to its current site on Bui Quoc Khanh Street, Thu Dau Mot Ward, Ho Chi Minh City. The Fujian-origin Li lineage of the Chinese community concretized Ong Bon here as That Phu Dai Nhan, also known as That Phu Vuong Gia Cong, regarded as the progenitors of the following lineages: clans: Lì (力), Zhōu (周), Zhū (朱), Xiāo (萧), Guō (郭), Zhào (赵), and Lǐ (李).

According to accounts shared by local elders, during the Han dynasty more than 360 examination candidates set out for Chang'an to sit for the imperial examinations in pursuit of official careers. Fond of poetry and literary composition, they often gathered to sing and recite verses in a cave. Upon learning of this, Zhang Tianshi (Zhang Daoling, also known as Zhang Ling), a Daoist master skilled in talismanic magic within the imperial court, devised a plot to harm them. He intoxicated the emperor and induced him to issue an edict ordering the execution of all the candidates. Through magical means, Zhang caused the cave entrance to collapse, burying all 360 candidates alive. The unjust spirits of these scholars repeatedly appeared, seeking their way home. Disturbed by these apparitions, the emperor conferred upon

them the title “Dai Nhan” (Great Lords) in an attempt to appease their spirits. This incident was later recounted to Zhang Daoling, who then used his powers to confine the spirits within bamboo tubes and cast them into a river, intending for them to drift out to sea. However, the bamboo tubes did not reach the sea but instead washed ashore, where beggars retrieved them. Upon removing the cloth sealing the tubes, the spirits were immediately released and once again appeared before the emperor. At this point, the emperor came to fully understand the situation. Filled with remorse for having unjustly caused the deaths of innocent people and with regret over the loss of such talented scholars, he issued a new edict declaring that those belonging to a particular lineage would be honored as Dai Nhan of that lineage, and collectively bestowed upon them the title “Vuong Gia Cong”. In each locality from which these individuals originated, the local population was instructed to establish temples for their worship. In Anxi, Fujian Province, there were seven such individuals, and a temple was therefore established to worship them. Consequently, in later worship practices, these seven figures came to be collectively known as That Phu Dai Nhan (七府大人) or That Phu Vuong Gia Cong (七府王爺公).

Figure 1. Phuoc An Temple main sanctuary and statue of Ong Bon – That Phu Dai Nhan (Photograph taken by the authors, May 10, 2019)

3.2. Ritual Process and Meanings in the Ong Bon Festival

Based on many years of participation in festivals at Phuoc An Temple, we have documented numerous distinctive practices that devotees have maintained across generations. These practices are not merely expressions of religious observance but also embody deeper layers of meaning, reflecting conceptions of deities, blessings, protection, and community cohesion within the Chinese community in Thu Dau Mot. This section focuses on interpreting the meanings of rituals and embodied practices through two major festivals at Phuoc An Temple: the sedan chair procession festival on the 16th day of the first lunar month and the birthday festival of Ong Bon. Interpreting these ritual practices helps clarify the role of symbols in sustaining belief, reinforcing identity, and generating sacred experiences within the festival context. Drawing on the symbolic theories of Turner and Geertz, this section analyzes the underlying meanings embedded in these practices, demonstrating how rituals operate as a highly expressive system of signs and thereby illuminating the distinctive features of Ong Bon worship in Southern Vietnam.

3.2.1. The sedan chair procession festival on the 16th day of the first lunar month

This is the longest-running festival in the region, with the ritual procession beginning at noon on the 16th day of the first lunar month and continuing until 4:00 a.m. the following day. In Fujian, such processions are commonly referred to as “Dai thien tuan thu” (Grand procession), intended to allow the deities to procession among the populace, bestowing blessings and prosperity. This occasion also enables devotees to approach the deities most closely, as they are carried on sedan chairs during the procession through residential areas. In the past, the procession sometimes lasted until dawn; however, it has since been shortened, with offerings now concentrated at selected ritual points rather than at numerous locations as before. The festival at Phuoc An Temple bears a strong Daoist character, and in ritual proceedings the Daoist ritual master assumes primary responsibility for presiding over and guiding the ceremonies. During festival occasions at Phuoc An Temple, the Temple Management Committee invites deities worshiped at Bich Lien Dinh (Kuan Yin Temple), including Kuan Yin, Kuan Ti, Poh Seng Tai Tay, Zhou Cang, Kuan Ping, Red Boy, Nezha, and He Xiangu, to participate in the joint rituals. Similarly, as in festivals held at Bich Lien Dinh, the committee also invites the saint of the Xiāo lineage - regarded as the most senior figure among the That Phu Dai Nhan - to attend the ceremony. In addition, the deity Zhu Li, worshiped at Thanh An Cung[1], is also invited to join the festival through the ritual medium of incense offering.

At approximately 8:00 a.m., the Daoist ritual master together with the Temple Management Committee performs the ritual of inviting the deities onto eight sedan chairs (輦轎), a chair-like form carried by two poles on either side, which have been prepared in advance at the ancestral hall of the Li lineage. Phuoc An Temple maintains the practice of sedan chair shaking; therefore, the statues are securely bound with cloth by the young men of the carrying team, and a large amount of joss paper is placed beneath them. In addition to the That Phu Dai Nhan, Kuan Yin, Kuan Ti and Poh Seng Tai Tay are also invited onto the sedan chairs to participate in the procession, while the other deities remain behind to “guard the temple.”

At exactly noon, following the ritual, each sedan chair is carried out of the ancestral hall amid the cheers of the crowd and the lively sounds of drums and gongs performed by lot dance troupes. Leading the procession are the flag team and two large lanterns, this is followed by the Hau dance troupes[2],

[1] Bich Lien Dinh and Thanh An cung are two temples also managed by the Fujianese-speaking Chinese community of the Ly lineage. Both temples are located on Bui Quoc Khanh Street, Thu Dau Mot Ward, Ho Chi Minh City.

[2] Hau Dance: A distinctive form of dance specific to the Hokkien Chinese community in Binh Duong. Unlike the Lion, Dragon, or Lion dances, the Hầu dance is a ritual performance featured in festivals of the Hokkien Chinese in Binh Duong, particularly during the Ong Bon festival. The term "Hau" is derived from the word "Hảo" (好 - Hảo meaning good or lucky). Some interpret the name "Hau" as a phonetic variation of "Hổ" (虎 - Tiger).

followed by the ritual team consisting of the Daoist ritual master, a drummer, and a gong player. Next comes the sedan chair team, proceeding in a single line and arranged in the following order: Kuan Yin; Kuan Ti; Poh Seng Tai Tay; followed by the That Phu Dai Nhan and finally the Lion and Dragon dance troupes. The procession attracts a large number of participants who follow and escort the deities, as it is believed to provide an opportunity for devotees to establish communion with the divine and receive good fortune. Throughout the procession, the eight sedan chairs are alternately carried and shaken by groups of young men, with two carriers assigned to shake each sedan chair. The shaking is vigorous, involving circular rotations and shoulder strikes. Cloth straps connecting the two ends of the carrying poles help cushion the impact, preventing injury to the carriers' shoulders.

At each stopping point, where household incense altars are set up by local residents - often with several families pooling offerings at a single site - the Hau troupe of Phuoc An Temple assumes the role of a vanguard, circling the incense altar three times. The sedan chairs are then invited to take their designated positions, allowing devotees to offer incense. The Daoist ritual master, together with the ritual team, performs chanting rites at the incense altars. At the conclusion of these rites, the ritual master conducts divination by drawing lots to confirm the messages of the deities. Before departing, the young carriers lift the sedan chairs and circle the incense altar three times.

In this manner, the procession proceeds through all ritual points along its route, continuing until the following morning. Wherever the procession passes, resounding sounds follow - drumbeats and the cheers of festival-goers-creating a joyful atmosphere characteristic of the early days of the lunar new year and reverberating throughout the entire area.

The climax of the festival occurs when the procession returns to the temple, marked by the continuous ringing of bronze bells inside the sanctuary, signaling the return of Ong Bon. A large crowd gathers, pressing closely together to find a vantage point from which to witness the concluding rites. The sedan chair carriers perform three clockwise and three counterclockwise circuits around the temple, followed by the Hau troupe of Phuoc An Temple.

According to the ritual sequence, once a sedan chair completes its circuits, it is carried into the temple, while those awaiting their turn remain outside. During this interval, the young carriers continue sedan chair shaking, moving in rhythm amid the cheers of the surrounding crowd. After the statues are ceremonially reinstalled, the Daoist ritual master and the ritual team conduct chanting rites. Meanwhile, each lion and dragon dance troupe solemnly enters the temple to perform bows and final salutations, bringing the festival rituals to a close.

On this festival day, we recorded a range of ritual practices such as sedan chair shaking, touching the statues\ and passing beneath the sedan chairs. This raises the question of why objects imbued with sacredness and ritual solemnity - such as the sedan chairs and deity statues - can undergo a process of apparent "secularization" through such practices. What meanings do these actions convey and what do they offer to pilgrims who participate in them?

a. Sedan chair shaking

The practice of sedan chair shaking appears during the festival procession inviting Ong Bon on the 16th day of the first lunar month. This custom has been preserved from the Fujian homeland and has become an indispensable component of the festival. Within festival activities, the sedan chair functions as the means by which the deity travels during the procession. It is also the moment when the distance between humans and deities becomes the closest, and those who actively narrow this distance are the sedan chair carriers themselves. Deities require worshippers in order to flourish, and ritual processions necessitate carriers to bear the sedan chairs. The sedan chair at Phuoc An Temple takes the form of a small, simple

seated chair with two carrying poles on either side, borne by only two carriers, enabling the performance of sedan chair shaking-a forceful, circular motion involving vigorous shaking and rotation (shake, rotate). By contrast, the palanquin (神轎) commonly found elsewhere is bulkier, typically requiring at least four carriers, which makes it difficult to execute strong shaking movements.

This custom also appears in many Mazu and Ong Bon sedan chair festivals in their Fujian homeland and in Taiwan; however, variations in the form and size of sedan chairs/palanquin result in different modes of practice. A range of expressions are used to describe this phenomenon, including shaking, dancing, flying, running and swaying. Because sedan chairs are relatively small in size, they allow for the performance of demanding movements such as sedan chair shaking. In contrast, palanquins, which are larger and typically carried by four or more bearers, can only perform swaying movements, similar to a hammock-like swing. Among the Vietnamese as well, the practice of palanquin dancing exists, though it is more commonly found in the Northern region. Because the palanquin used in these festivals are very large and massive, often requiring more than ten carriers, the movements are limited to running, circular rotations, or lifting and tossing the palanquin upward.

Based on ritual observation and drawing on Victor Turner's functional analysis of ritual, the practice of sedan chair shaking can be interpreted through three interrelated meanings:

(1) it symbolizes Ong Bon performing ritual power to subdue evil spirits along the procession route, with each episode of sedan chair shaking representing the elimination of a malevolent entity;
(2) from a festival perspective, it enlivens the atmosphere of the procession and fosters social cohesion by bringing community members together through shared participation;
(3) it is also understood as a means of pleasing the deities seated on the sedan chairs, allowing them to share in the joy of their descendants and the local community during the festival, thereby bestowing blessings upon the community.

Figure 2. Sedan chair carriers performing the sedan chair shaking ritual in front of Phuoc An Temple (Photograph taken by the authors, March 3, 2018)

This phenomenon has not yet been explained through a single, unified, or definitive interpretation regarding its origins. It may arise from the unconscious states of participants, or it may result from intentional actions enacted within the context of collective ritual performance. According to local

interpretations, sedan chair shaking occurs because the deities possess the carriers, causing the sedan chairs to move autonomously. Other explanations suggest that the movement derives from a form of "mystical energy" generated within the sacred space of the festival. Within this context, the boundary between the individual and the collective appears to dissolve, as participants merge into a shared emotional state. Sedan chair shaking can thus be understood as a mechanism of collective resonance, through which emotions, beliefs, and psychological states - encompassing both positive and negative elements - are amplified, contributing to the construction of a festival space that is sacred and symbolically charged.

b. Touching the statues, passing under the sedan chair - the meaning of receiving sacred/spiritual power

After the sedan chairs complete the ritual of "shaking the sedan chair," the bearers place them at the incense altars prepared by local residents along the procession route. In addition to offering incense, worshippers touch the statues and then touch their own heads or the bodies of accompanying children.

In many cultures, the practice of "touching statues" is regarded as a form of seeking blessings and good fortune. It is believed that by touching a specific part of a statue, sacred energy or luck can be transmitted to the individual, who may then carry these blessings back to their family. This practice can be understood as a symbolic act of "taking blessings home", similar to the custom of bringing home offerings after ritual worship for personal use. Typical examples include rubbing the nose of the bronze statue of President Abraham Lincoln at his tomb in Springfield, Illinois, which is believed to bring good luck, or touching the breast of Juliet's statue in Verona, which is said to ensure good fortune in love. In a more contemporary context, stock market investors often touch the Charging Bull statue in New York as a way of praying for success and prosperity in business.

In Marx's approach to the fetishism of commodities, and particularly within the anthropological tradition of "fetish objects" (William Pietz, Bruno Latour, among others), objects are not understood merely as inert material entities, but as entities endowed by humans with supernatural power. In this sense, objects become actants, functioning as mediators within networks of exchange between humans and the sacred (Marx, 1906: 83). From this perspective, the act of touching statues can be interpreted as a way through which people activate the latent power embedded in the object. Statues are not merely symbolic representations, but become "channels" for the transmission of blessings, health, and good fortune. It is precisely this attribution of power that explains why specific parts of statues - such as Lincoln's nose, Juliet's breast, or the genitals of the Wall Street bull - become focal points of touch, where belief and social practice are materially embodied.

Amy Whitehead (2019) spent many years conducting fieldwork at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Alcalá in Andalusia, Spain. In her work, she employs theories of animism and fetishism to critique and explore the dynamics of touching statues. She argues that "touching" is not merely an internal component of religious practice, but a primary mediating means through which devotees express sincerity and devotion toward the Virgin Mary. When comparing the phenomena she documents with the practice of touching statues for good fortune in the Ong Bon festival, it becomes evident that touching divine statues is not a form of symbolic "performance" but a genuine contact with the deity. This practice constitutes a mode of transferring sacred power from the statue to the human body (Whitehead, 2019: 230). Similar to the practice of touching statues of the Virgin Mary, when devotees touch the statue and then place their hands on their heads, they believe that they are absorbing the energy or blessings of Ong Bon. This constitutes a form of "embodied religious knowledge." From the perspective of fetish theory, the statue (object) is not merely something that has been "sacralized," but functions as an actant within a network connecting humans, material objects, deities, ritual practices, and sacred space (Whitehead, 2019: 228). In this case, the statue of Ong Bon is not simply a deified object, but operates as an active agent within a

"network of belief." When devotees touch the statue and then place their hands on their heads, the act is not merely symbolic; it is understood as a direct reception of sacred energy and blessings from the deity. In other words, tactile contact renders the relationship between humans and Ong Bon vivid and materially present within the devotees' own bodies.

In addition, we also observed that before the sedan chairs depart to proceed to the next ritual site, young male carriers lift the sedan chairs high above the ground, allowing devotees to take the opportunity to "crawl under the sedan chair" (**稜轎腳** / lîng-kiō-kha). In Mazu processions in Taiwan, crawling beneath the palanquin is a distinctive and commonly observed ritual practice. The scene of devotees passing under the palanquin is often striking: worshippers kneel prostrate on the ground, forming long and densely packed lines, which can significantly hinder the movement of palanquin. Nevertheless, the palanquin bearers remain remarkably patient, allowing each individual to pass through in turn so that devotees may fulfill their ritual wishes. Purposes:

- Seeking protection and blessings: praying for Mazu's blessings, protection, and the removal of misfortune.
- Humility: expressing devotees' reverence and absolute humility before the deity.
- Closeness: devotees do not merely kneel in worship along the route, but seek the closest possible contact with the deity's sacred power by allowing the divine palanquin to pass over their bodies.

This practice can be compared to the custom of devotees passing beneath the statue of Red Hare (Xich Tho) at temples dedicated to Kuan Ti, as well as to the Japanese ritual of passing through the *chinowa* grass ring (*chinowa kuguri*) during the summer purification ceremony (*Nagoshi no Harae*). In all these cases, the human body becomes the primary medium through which ritual efficacy is realized. Rather than merely observing or venerating from a distance, practitioners actively place their bodies in direct contact with sacred objects or spaces in order to absorb protective power, dispel misfortune, and restore moral and spiritual balance.

Turner (1967) emphasizes that ritual is a process of transition consisting of three stages: separation, liminality, and aggregation (Turner, 1967: 94). From Victor Turner's perspective, the act of crawling beneath the sedan chair of Ong Bon can be understood as a liminal ritual. This practice is not merely playful or performative; rather, participants temporarily detach themselves from everyday life and enter an "in-between" (liminal) moment in which their bodies come into direct contact with a sacred object. It is precisely this act of crossing that carries meanings of purification and rebirth, allowing participants to re-enter the community with a renewed status marked by protection and good fortune. At the same time, when many individuals collectively perform the act of crawling beneath the sedan chair, a sense of *communitas* is generated - that is, a form of social bonding grounded in the shared experience of the sacred. From an anthropological perspective, this constitutes a form of embodied ritual practice, in which the sedan chair, as a sacred object, functions as a mediating agent that transmits spiritual power and blessings to participants.

Figure 3: Worshippers lighting incense at the sedan chair and touching the statue to seek good fortune (Photo taken by the authors, March 28, 2025)

From the above observations, it can be seen that practices such as touching the Ong Bon statue and then touching one's head, or passing under the sedan chair during the festival, are not merely symbolic acts of seeking good fortune but forms of direct contact with the deity. According to Nguyen (2018), "Sacredness and sublimity constitute a kind of magnetic force that may be described as a field. Therefore, it is believed that everything associated with this field becomes imbued with sacredness" (Nguyen, 2018: 218–219). In this way, participants believe that they can receive blessings and sacred energy while simultaneously establishing a bodily - mental - spiritual connection with Ong Bon. From an anthropological perspective, these practices demonstrate that statues and procession sedan chairs are not simply ritual objects, but also function as mediating actants that activate, sustain, and vivify the sacred relationship between humans, deities, and the community. It is precisely through the performance of these acts that sacredness is reproduced and circulated, thereby contributing to the shaping of communal belief and cultural identity.

3.2.2. The Birthday Festival of Ong Bon - That Phu Dai Nhan

The Birthday Festival of Ong Bon is held annually from the 11th to the 13th day of the eighth lunar month; every three years, a traditional *Hat boi* (classical opera) troupe is invited to perform. The main ritual day is the 12th day of the eighth lunar month, which is believed to be the birthday of the saint of the Xiāo lineage - the most senior figure among the That Phu Dai Nhan.

As with other festivals throughout the year, the Management Committee of the temple invites deities from Bich Lien Dinh and Thanh An Cung to participate in the celebration. In addition, on this occasion, the committee pastes 39 talismanic papers of various colors on the main altar in the main hall, symbolizing 39 deities such as the Jade Emperor, Taibai Jinxing, Daode Tianzun... On the altar, four *xien lin* (long, sharp iron rods resembling large needles) are also placed, including three long rods and one short rod. Inside the main hall, seven red chairs covered with cloth are arranged, each topped with a basin

of water containing pomelo leaves and a towel. During festival occasions at Phuoc An mieu, a Heaven-offering altar is also set up at the entrance, typically featuring vegetarian offerings.

The ritual begins at the moment the clock turns to the new day on the 11th day of the eighth lunar month. The ceremony is presided over by a Daoist priest, opening with a drum-invoking rite similar to the *khai trong* (opening drum) ceremony preceding temple festivals in Vietnamese practice, followed by the incense-offering ritual conducted by the Temple Management Committee. At the conclusion of the ceremony, a large amount of votive paper offerings is burned. On the morning of the 11th day of the eighth lunar month, the *xay chau dai boi* (Ritual of Audience Offering/Ceremony) ceremony is held. It begins with the *khai trong* rite, performed by a *Co quan* (ritual drummer), praying for favorable weather, national peace, and social harmony. After the drum sequences, the *dai boi* segment commences, performed by artists from the *Hat boi* (classical opera) troupe. On the evening of the 11th day of the eighth lunar month, a ritual offering is conducted by the riverbank with a simple offering tray. At the end of the ceremony, a large quantity of votive paper is burned.

Ritual offerings at Phuoc An mieu take a form similar to ancestral death-anniversary rites and are conducted three times a day. During these days, people from various places bring offerings to the temple. The climax occurs on the main ritual day, the 12th day of the eighth lunar month, when the number of offering tables set up in front of the temple reaches 20 - 30. These offerings are presented in continuous rotation, with lavish ritual items-sometimes including the dedication of an entire Hat boi performance as an offering. During the noon ritual on the 12th day of the eighth lunar month, eight adolescents - descendants of the Chinese community - take on the roles of ritual soldiers. Wearing bamboo hats and holding wooden staffs, they line up to perform rites inside the temple. The ritual procession then moves to the Li lineage ancestral hall and back again three times; during the procession, they occasionally chant the word “pi-o” in unison. The ceremony concludes with the burning of a large amount of votive paper. During the festival, a form of spirit possession (*len dong*) is also observed. A middle-aged man continuously dances to the music of the opera troupe, accompanied by the incessant ringing of bronze bells. The spirit medium’s costume is changed, and a large amount of votive paper is stuffed into the front pocket of the costume. Members of the Management Committee scatter rice and salt into the crowd of worshippers. The medium then pierces his mouth with the longest *xien lin* and proceeds to sit on the ritual chair (*ghe dao*) to watch the Hat boi. After about twenty minutes, the medium moves into the main hall, instructs the Management Committee to light three sticks of incense, and delivers the messages that the deities wish to convey. The medium speaks in the Fujian dialect.

What does the chant “pi-o” mean?

Throughout the noon ritual on the 12th day of the eighth lunar month, in addition to the Daoist priest’s prayers for peace, the presence of eight adolescents in the roles of ritual soldiers - continuously chanting the slogan “pi-o” - creates a solemn atmosphere. The leader initiates the chant, followed by the entire group chanting in unison, forming a sacred soundscape that draws the surrounding crowd’s focused attention. However, when we asked about the meaning of this chant, no one was able to provide an explanation, including the officiating Daoist priest. For the most part, participants follow tradition. What they know about Ong Bon’s sacred narrative, as presented above, has been transmitted orally; there is no written text preserved to explain the origin or meaning of this chant.

In some areas of Fujian and Taiwan, the practice of chanting the slogan “pi-o” is still preserved. Notable examples include the Pak Tai festival at Baofu temple in Baixi Village, Xiping Town, Anxi County, Quanzhou City, Fujian Province, as well as the Mazu procession in Baishatun, Tongxiao, Miaoli County, Taiwan. However, in these contexts, the chant is performed only when the deity’s sedan chair returns to the temple at the conclusion of the procession, with the entire surrounding crowd chanting in unison until the deity image is reinstalled in its proper place.

In a conversation with several Taiwanese interlocutors, they explained the meaning of the chant "pi-o" as follows:

> *"That sound corresponds to 进哦 (Jìn ó), which means 'to enter' or 'to proceed inside (the palace).' It is a way of celebrating the deity's return—serving as a signal of arrival—while also expressing a wish for smooth progress and prosperity in all matters."*
>
> *[Lei Zhi Hai, 30 years old, male, office worker, online interview, September 10, 2025]*

Another interpretation of this chant appears in the Baishatun Mazu procession:

> *"Essentially, it is a mobilizing call" 'The palanquin is coming! The palanquin is coming!' More precisely, it is pronounced as 轎喔 (Kiō-o). It functions as a form of announcement and crowd coordination, helping people along the roadside or those kneeling to pass under the palanquin know that the deity's palanquin is approaching, so they can prepare themselves or make way."*
>
> *[Du Yue He, 37 years old, male, business professional, online interview, April 11, 2025]*

Xu ZiHan (2025) argues that this chant originates from ritual language used in the past to express reverence when encountering deities, and that over time it gradually became widespread. Its primary functions are: (1) maintaining order and safety; (2) expressing welcome and respect; and (3) fostering a sense of connection and resonance in faith. Thus, it is not merely a slogan, but a convergence of spiritual energy, symbolizing the profound power of collective belief (Xu ZiHan, 2025).

In our view, the sound *pi-o* can be regarded as a phonetic variation of *kio-o* or *jin-o*. Although there are certain differences in how these sounds are used in ritual practice, in terms of purpose and meaning they all function as signals announcing the presence or return of the deities. This leads to the question of why this sound is employed in the belief system of the That Phu Dai Nhan, whereas in Fujian and Taiwan it mainly appears in the worship of Mazu and Pak Tai. It is noteworthy that these forms of belief are also present in the Thu Dau Mot area; however, the *pi-o* sound is not consistently used in the same ritual contexts.

Through long-term observation, we also recorded several other phenomena at Phuoc An Mieu in an effort to further explain this issue. The first concerns the practice of *tranh lộc* (scrambling for blessed items). After the end of the procession on the 16th day of the first lunar month, when the deity sedan chairs return to the temple, during the re-enshrinement of the statues, people compete to obtain blessed items - namely votive papers tied together with the deity statues on the sedan chairs prior to the procession. Notably, this competition occurs mainly in relation to the blessed items of the deities associated with Bich Lien Dinh, whereas those of Ong Bon - That Phu Dai Nhan attract far less attention.

Similarly, the practice of using talismans at Phuoc An Mieu also reveals a tendency to prioritize talismans of Poh Seng Tai Tay and Nezha, while talismans of Ong Bon are rarely observed. These data raise questions regarding the position of Ong Bon in the collective consciousness of the Chinese community: is the Fujianese-speaking Li clan Chinese community showing a tendency to "borrow" the images of more widely recognized deities in order to reinforce the appeal and sacred legitimacy of a local and relatively less well-known belief system such as the cult of That Phu Dai Nhan?

> According to the views shared by expert T.H.M.P (a scholar with numerous studies on the Chinese community in Vietnam) regarding this issue: *"I think this is because many people do not clearly understand who Ong Bon is. Deities such as Kuan Yin, Kuan Ti, and Poh Seng Tai Tay are already widely recognized, and this has long influenced the collective consciousness of the community."*
>
> *[T.H.M.P., female, expert, 52 years old, Tran Van On Street, Thu Dau Mot, interview conducted on May 13, 2024]*

Nguyen (2020), in his study of the *To su* (Founding Master) temple of the Hakka community in Buu Long (Bien Hoa, Dong Nai), proposes a hypothesis concerning the transformation of traditional worship of village craft ancestors into the worship of Thien Hau. Rather than abandoning the cult of the Founding Master, the community retained it while overlaying an additional symbolic layer - a process he metaphorically describes as "the body of a butterfly with the soul of a caterpillar." Through this transformation, cultural boundaries were effectively blurred, enabling the Hakka community to achieve their desired goals of social integration while simultaneously preserving their craft heritage and ancestral traditions. This process represents a shift from what was once considered "non-orthodox" to "orthodox," gradually gaining recognition and integration within Vietnamese society (Nguyen, 2020).

According to Charles, the establishment of spiritual institutions for immigrants often provides ethnic communities with a refuge from hostility and discrimination within the wider society, while also creating opportunities for economic mobility. These institutions function as major sources of economic and social support for those in need and are recognized by the broader society (Charles, 2004). As noted by Dang and Duong (2024) in their study of the liturgical texts used in festivals at Phuoc An Temple, because That Phu Dai Nhan is not included in the Daoist canonical system of divine genealogies, it is not possible to apply scriptures from the Daoist Canon (*Daozang*). Consequently, ritual practices must be "borrowed" and adapted from folk traditions to suit local realities. The authors further argue that the Ly lineage has actively incorporated additional folk spiritual and cultural elements in order to reinforce its own ritual "substance" and symbolic power (Dang & Duong, 2024, p. 115).

Thus, the ritual sound "pi-o" can be interpreted as a form of borrowing and adaptation from other belief systems, employed to construct a "quasi-new" and distinctive religious system in comparison with other forms of Chinese popular religion. This process serves to reinforce a localized, lineage-based belief system that remains relatively little known, such as the cult of That Phu Dai Nhan.

From Geertz's perspective, culture is a system of webs of meaning constructed by humans, within which rituals and beliefs operate as symbols that reflect and communicate communal values. Accordingly, the cult of Ong Bon - That Phu Dai Nhan at Phuoc An Temple can be understood as the result of a process of symbolic construction and reinterpretation within a local context.

The incorporation of widely recognized deities, along with the borrowing and adaptation of talismans, ritual texts, and practices from multiple traditions, is not a random form of syncretism. Rather, it represents a deliberate strategy to restructure the system of religious meanings. This process contributes to reinforcing the cult's legitimacy and its capacity to endure amid competition from more dominant religious systems.

Through ritual practice, the Fujianese Li lineage within the Chinese community has constructed a new "symbolic surface" for the Ong Bon cult. As a result, this belief system simultaneously preserves its lineage-based identity while expanding its ability to integrate into a broader cultural space. Ultimately, the Ong Bon cult has gradually undergone a process of "institutionalization" and gained wider recognition within the context of contemporary Vietnamese society.

Conclusion

By applying the theoretical frameworks of Geertz and Turner, this article has clarified the ritual processes and symbolic meanings of the Ong Bon – That Phu Dai Nhan cult at Phuoc An Temple in Thu Dau Mot Ward. Through the two main rituals—the procession of Ong Bon (the 16th day of the first lunar month) and the birthday celebration of Ong Bon (the 12th day of the eighth lunar month)—ritual practices such as touching the statue, crawling under the sedan chair, shaking the sedan chair, and chanting the "pi-

o" slogan are identified as symbols of divine–human communication and as mechanisms that reinforce communal belief.

Notably, within the Southern Vietnamese context, the Ong Bon cult in Thu Dau Mot exhibits distinctive characteristics associated with the image of That Phu Dai Nhan and a specific ritual system, differentiating it from other forms of Ong Bon worship found elsewhere. These features contribute to the uniqueness of the local religious landscape of the Chinese community in Thu Dau Mot, while also reflecting the community's capacity for adaptation, creativity, and symbolic reconstruction within the contemporary socio-cultural environment.

References

Binh Duong Association of Historical Sciences. (2012). *Chinese People in Binh Duong*. Hanoi: National Political Publishing House.

Charles, H. (2004). *The Role of Religion in the Origins and Adaptation of Immiant Groups in the United States*. IMR Volume 38. Number 3 (Fall 2004): 1206 - 1233

Dang, H. L. (2014). *The transformation process in the cult of Ông Bổn of Vietnamese - Chinese in Nam Bộ*. Religious Studies Review, 12(138), 90–97. Retrieved from https://vjol.info.vn/index.php/RSREV/article/view/39102/31512

Dang, H. L. & Duong, H. H. B. (2024). *Daoist elements in the Ong Bon festival of the Fujianese Chinese community in Thu Dau Mot City, Binh Duong Province.* Vietnam Social Sciences Review, 7, 108–118.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books Pub

Marx, K. (1906). *Capital: A critique of political economy (S. Moore & E. Aveling, Trans.; F. Engels, Ed.; E. Untermann, Rev.)*. New York: The Modern Library. (Original work published 1867)

Nguyen, N. T. (2020). *Rituals and symbols in ritual practices*. Ho Chi Minh City: Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City Press.

Nguyen, T. N. (2018). *Cultural studies - The science of culture*. Hanoi: Ethnic Culture Publishing House.

Turner, V. (1967). *The Forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. New York: Cornell University Press

Turner, V. (1975). *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual*. New York: Cornell University Press

Xu, Z. H. (2025). *Baishatun Mazu arrives at Beigang Chaotian Temple: What does tens of thousands of people shouting "Jin o" mean? An essential guide to pilgrimage culture for devotees*. Retrieved from https://www.storm.mg/lifestyle/5357351

Whitehead, A. (2019). *Touching, crafting, knowing: religious artefacts and the fetish within animism*. Body and Religion, 2(2), 224-244.