

An Investigation into Objects of Worship in *Then* belief

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ABSTRACT: Then is a form of cultural activity and spiritual life of Tày ethnic people in the mountainous area of the North Vietnam. The paper proposes comments on culture of Then belief after investigating its pantheon and religious system. The author argues that this belief is a combination of various faiths such as Shamanism, indigenous beliefs including ancestor worship and deities who govern lands and villages, and imported beliefs such as Three Religions and Four Palaces of the Kinh. Then pantheon and belief system reflexes its development under impacts of this people's historical and social circumstances. Finally, the author concludes that Then has developed from an old phenomenon of folk Shamanism to a belief system which is more professional and methodical.

Then is an activity of culture and belief of the Tày in the mountainous area of the North of Vietnam. Since 1970, collection and research of *Then* have gained impressive results. Especially, many collections of *Then* in texts have been published. However, the element of belief which is the key point in *Then* seems not to have been satisfactorily dealt with. From 1978 until present, in implementing project to investigate culture and belief of the Tày, Nùng ethnic minorities in Cao Bằng and Bắc Kạn provinces, we had chance to approach *Then* ceremonies and artists who were practising *Then*.

Basing on research by predecessors and on our field works, we want to present early ideas on the *Then* belief via its pantheon and the system of belief in *Then*.

The ones who practice *Then*, beside worshipping ancestors and deities as other ordinary families, will set up the altar for ancestor of the profession, for father and mother, and for *Then*'s great mandarins. Each time when a *Then* master enters the profession, he must set up *Then* altar at home. The altar was set up with help of a Tào godfather at the first day of the ritual when the new *Then* master was conferred a title. Depending on each location or kind of *Then*, the *Then* altar can be placed

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together with or separated with the ancestor altar. Even the *Then* altar is placed in the same place of the ancestor altar, the incense-burner must be separated. In reality, most *Then* masters place *Then* altar separately and this altar is called *Then* palace. Depending on which *Then* order that the god worshipped takes a different name. However, the common feature among *Then* orders is the same conception and method of worship. Both altars for deity and for ancestor belong to one family *Then* worshipping system. Although decoration and arrangement of the altar can be different in each family, we can see two basic kinds of altar as follow:

1. Altar for *Then* and altar for ancestor are separated. The altar for ancestor is often placed at the central area of the house while altar for *Then* is located at the right corner beside the main door. This *Then* altar is arranged more complicated.

2. Only one altar is used for both *Then* and ancestors. This altar can be placed at the central area of the house or at the right corner beside the main door. The altar has different floors, often 2 or 3 which depends on specific location and family's needs of worship. The top floor is for ancestors and *Then*'s great mandarins, the lower floor is for *Then* only. The altar for *Then* nam or Southern *Then* in Quảng Hoà (Cao Bằng) is made rather simply with only one floor where 4 incense-burners are placed for worshipping *Then*'s great mandarins.

Thus, family worship of ancestor and deities is a traditional rule that every *Then* master must strictly follow. To a *Then* master, this worship system play a role that is as important as the pantheon for his ancestors of profession, both in family rituals or in outdoor ceremonies. What is more, the worship for ancestors of profession can be seen as a form of inheriting the ancestor worship. We can only provide a simple picture of pantheon by *Then* masters as follow:

- Jade Emperor
- Great Mandarins (mandarins of magic power, mandarins of the profession)
- Local deities (Kitchen God, Earth God, Tutelary God)
- Family *Then* gods (Ancestor master, Father master – Mother master, ancestors)
- *Then* Vía (live soul of *Then*).

1. Jade Emperor

In viewpoint of the Tày people who worship *Then*, Jade Emperor is the lord of the Heaven, representing for ultimate power of the Heaven Kingdom, who can confer

titles for professions of Mo, *Then* and Tào on Earth. In *Then* Quảng Hòa, among 5 *Then* major mandarins presenting for 5 directions, the Jade Emperor stays at the central point which is most important. In reality, however, the Jade Emperor is not the object of worship in every *Then* rituals. His main role is revealed in the ceremony to confer a *Then* title (a certificate to work as a professional). *Then* can only get to the door of Jade Emperor's house in great rituals such as *Lầu Then* and *Lầu* of conferring *Then* titles. In some places such as in Hà Giang province, Jade Emperor is called Lord *Then*. In contrast, Jade Emperor is not mentioned in some rituals of conferring titles for *pụt nhạc* which belongs to Pụt Ngạn order.

2. Great Mandarins

Mandarins who protect the four directions are elevated to the status of *Then*'s power and troops holders. They are called 30 mandarins of magic power and 80 mandarins of military power. *Then* has no specific ancestor master of profession but its origin is from Magic door where magic of the profession are preserved. Those magics are ranging from stepping on fire, holding hot charcoal in mouth to travelling across river or sea, etc. Before going out for rituals, a *Then* master must get to this door to ask for magics and invite great mandarins to come with him.

According to the worshiping system of *Then* masters in Quảng Hòa district, Cao Bằng province, there are a lot of mandarins with different names. This reflects the mixture of importing believes, especially Three Religions and belief of Four Palaces from the low land into *Then* belief. If the Jade Emperor who holds the central position is calculated, there are five key mandarins as follow:

- Phía Cẩm: belongs to the East, called Thanh Đế (the Blue king)
- Phía Đán: belongs to the West, called Bạch Đế (the White king)
- Phía Danh: belongs to the South, called Xích Đế (Fire king)
- Female Buddha belongs to the North, called Hắc Đế (Black king)
- Jade Emperor belongs to the Central, called Hoàng Đế (Yellow Emperor)

Under these key mandarins, there many other mandarins at various ranks, protecting 5 directions, such as:

- Eastern Mandarin Nguyễn Bá
- Western Mandarin Triệu Công Minh

- Southern Mandarin Lư Văn Đạt
- Northern Mandarin Lại Văn Nghiệp
- Central Mandarin Lý Nguyên Phan

Under these mandarins, there is a great number of troops and horses.

In short, we can imagine that the *Then* master has a very powerful army with specific ranks that protects 5 directions and all are under the governance of the Jade Emperor.

The Three Religions were imported into *Then* by local Tào masters whose profession mainly relied on Chinese books with the Southern accent. Among Tào, Mo, *Then* and Pụt masters of the Tày, Tào master is considered to be superior than *Then* and he can on behalf of the Jade Emperor to confer titles for *Then* masters. There is no difference in the ritual to confer titles for a Tào or a *Then* master. In the ritual, Tào master would, on behalf of the Jade Emperor, confer titles for *Then* and Tào (the higher ranking Tào master can perform the ritual to confer titles for lower ranking Tào). A Tào master would take a title of Đạo such as Lô Đạo Đình, Nông Đạo Long, etc. while a *Then* master would take the title of Pháp (meaning *magic*) such as Hoàng Pháp Lý, Nông Pháp Nhân, etc. The one who practices *Then* needs not only a godmother called *mẻ slay* who will guide him in his profession but also a godfather called *pá slay* who will perform ritual to confer *Then* titles for him each time he can get to a higher level. If the godfather dies, the *Then* master must find himself another one so he can be continually conferred titles. Therefore, a *Then* master can have 1 to 3 godfathers. Especially the south *Then* clan in Quảng Hoà, east of Cao Bằng, because most *Then* master are good at Chinese, there are masters who also play the role of the Tào master in the ritual of title conferment.

According to some researchers, Mo, *Then*, Pụt are in fact local magicians. When Three Religions were introduced, these magicians had to call Tào their masters and admitted themselves to be students of the Three Religions¹. The interaction among different professional doctrines results in the phenomenon of *Then* masters also play role of Tào masters such as in some places of Na Rì (Bắc Kạn) or in Quảng Hoà (Cao Bằng).

It is possible that due to the influence of Tào masters, in the *Then*'s pantheon, there appear many deities and immortals of the Three Religions who hold *Then*

¹. *Ethnic minorities of Tày and Nùng in Vietnam*, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences and Institute of Ethnology, 1992, pp. 239-240.

masters' military power and ghost soldiers. Here, beside key subjects of Taoism such as Jade Emperor, Tam Thanh, there are Chinese kings such as Vũ Vương, Hán Vương, characters in Chinese classical literatures such as *Journey to the West* and a number of local mandarins who protect five directions, including Nguyễn Bá, Triệu Công Minh, Lưu Văn Đật, Lại Văn Nghiệp and Lý Nguyên Phan.

What is more, *Then* is influenced by magical Taoism of the Kinh and a part of belief in Four Palaces of the low land. Investigation pantheon of *Then* master in Quảng Hoà reveals many clues proving the connection between *Then* master's professional mandarins and gods of the low-land magicians. Firstly, we must list professional mandarins of *Then* such as *phia Cẩm* (Purple mountain), *Phia Đán* (Đán mountain), *Phia Danh* (Danh mountain). Although they have local names (*phia* meaning mountain), when they get through mediumship practitioners, they speak language of the King. Besides, some mandarins have names and characteristics which are similar to gods in the low land². For examples, mandarin Nhuệ Sơn Tiêu Độc Cước or *Phia Đán* (also called Ngụy Trung Tiêu Độc Cước) in the low land is called Độc Cước (god with one leg) who is very powerful in fighting against ghosts and devils. He is a son of a very famous magician from Từ Sơn (Bắc Ninh). When he was 3 years old, he bet the drum so loudly that Heavenly God was awoken. The God sent heavenly mandarins to the earth and while the child was sleeping, they cut him into two parts. The father buried him but he resurrected with head, body and only one leg, thus was called Độc Cước god. In Sầm Sơn (Thanh Hoá), there is a temple that worships Độc Cước with a giant foot print on a stone. In *Then*, this god is called a mandarin but without any biography. He, however, is dumb, only using gestures whenever he appears. Therefore, we put that mandarin Độc Cước in *Then* of the Tày has some relation with magicians of the low land. The fact that between a god with one leg and a dumb mandarin, we can still see the similarity and difference which is naturally the typical characteristic of folk culture.

Beside Ngụy Trung Tiêu Độc Cước, there are other important mandarins of professions called *Phia Danh* including mandarins: Thiên Bồng Thiên Thu, Ngũ Lôi Huyền Đàn, Bạch Xà Hắc Hồ, Thủy Thổ Hoả Thang who represent for *Then*'s power and magics. We found that three of those mandarins have relations with other gods of the magicians in the low land. They are:

- Mandarin Ngũ Lôi Huyền Đàn: in the low land, he is called Huyền Đàn. He is said to have appeared since Đinh dynasty. He always rode a black tiger, and was the

². See more in Trần Ngọc Thêm. *Cơ sở văn hoá Việt Nam (Foundations of Vietnamese Culture)*, Giáo dục Publishing House, 1998, pp. 279-280.

winner of any battle. That is the reason why he is enlisted among 12 heavenly mandarins.

- Hắc Hổ mandarin (in *Then*, he has other names such as Nam Hải, Hổ Lang) is a black tiger mandarin. In the low land, there is a similar god called Ông Năm Dinh (Ngũ Dinh the great mandarin) who is the Ngũ Hổ (five tigers) god with power to expel ghosts and devils and worshipped on the pantheon under the form of a Ngũ Hổ painting. The Tiger mandarin appears in *Then* belief under the form of a tiger, showing his power by roaring or in a gesture of being about to catch a prey.

- White Snake mandarin. This mandarin has a name in *Then*'s pantheon but does not appear in the mediumship as the Tiger mandarin. In the low land, the similar great mandarin is Tuần Tranh. They are two god snakes who are said to hatch from the egg found by an old couple in Tứ Kỳ (Hải Dương). When the two snakes grew up, because they often caught chicken for food, the couple threw them into the Tranh river. At the point where they were thrown, the water became a strong whirl and got sacred. The great mandarin Tuần Tranh is worshiped on the altar under the form of two paper snakes known as Thanh Xà (Blue Snake) and Bạch Xà (White Snake).

Moreover, on the altar of a *Then* master, we can find Trần Hưng Đạo, a saint from the low land who is famous for saving people. This saint is not present in *Then* rituals. However, in the folk thoughts of the Tày, the good ghosts always come with the bad ghosts. Although Saint Trần is not found, we find that Phạm Nhân - who is the very enemy of Saint Trần - is invited in *Then*' ritual of conferment.

Saints, gods mentioned above are all built up by Vietnamese (the Kinh) besides the popular worship for highest gods of Chinese Taoism such as Jade Emperor and Heavenly King's father (Thái Thượng Lão Quân).

We learn that gods worshipped by magicians in the low land are also deities in the pantheon of Four Palaces belief (Ngũ Hổ, Tuần Tranh, Hưng Đạo Đại Vương). This proves that *Then* mandarins of professions are more or less influenced by Four Palaces belief of the low land. This could be the reason why some *Then* orders in west of Cao Bằng need a magician from the low land to be the master of the ritual of conferment.

A manifestation showing the close relation between Four Palaces belief and *Then* is the incarnation of *Then* mandarins of profession during the ritual of conferment. There are several similar features between incarnation in *Then* and in the Four Palaces belief. For example, during incarnation of god Ngũ Hổ of the Kinh and

mandarin Nam Hải of the Tày, the medium must crawl by feet and hands, showing tiger's typical movements.

In fact, although the Kinh's mandarins of profession must be worshipped on the *Then* altar, most *Then* masters do not know or understand this detail. If ritual of mediumship and Kinh language are not used, many people may not know that there are mandarins of profession who come from the low land. Moreover, the these mandarins' appearance in *Then* is blended according to the Tày's understanding. That is why Pham Nhàn is a lady in *Then*, called "Bà Chúa" (female god) who governs all kinds of diseases and accidents.

In general, Three Religions as well as the cult of magics in the low land and the belief of the Four Palaces have been indigenized into *Then* so that they become more familiar to the ordinary people's conception. Moreover, only some gods in the cult of magics are chosen to participate into the *Then* belief system such as ones who relate to healing, expelling ghosts or delivering from misfortune.

3. Local Gods include Kitchen god, Earth god, Tutelary god. These gods only have the role of assistance, not the keys subjects in the ritual. Despite different conceptions among orders of *Then* or Pút about these gods, no one denies or neglects them. Some *Then* masters consider these gods with lower ranks so in the ritual, the Earth god may have to lead the way for *Then* soldiers. Others consider all gods the same and they try to avoid conflict between two kinds of troop.

These gods can be categorized into two classes:

+ The Kitchen god, Earth god in the masters' location. These are worshipped at home and very important to *Then* during home ritual. When a *Then* master goes to work away from home, these gods are informed about time, place and things that he is going to do. By doing so, a *Then* master can complete their job with these gods' support.

+ The Kitchen god, Earth god, Tutelary god in the clients' place. *Then* masters must talk to these gods and ask for their help.

The worship of local gods reflects the worship of gods who govern villages and lands that is the indigenous belief of the Tày and also the indispensable element in *Then*. However, as entering *Then*, in Tào masters' interpretation, local gods with specific names such as *bếp*, *thó*, *slán*, etc. have been renamed according to Three

Religions such as Kitchen god, Earth god, Tutelary god. The different point is that these gods are also considered to be a force with the equal power with *Then*'s.

4. *Then* Family gods include Grand masters - Magicians, Father master, Mother master, Ancestors

+ Grand masters – magicians are the first ones who taught the profession for *Then* since the old times. These gods have specific titles and are worshipped by *Then* of many generations and considered to be patron masters and masters of *Then* family. When *Then* goes to work, he will invite all these masters to go with him.

+ Godfather – Godmother (or *pá slay*, *mě slay*). They are the sponsors and protectors for *Then*'s talent. *Then* practitioners set up incense holder to worship their live souls (*khoăn đíp*) if they are still alive. Before practising the magic to summon soldiers and horses, a *Then* practitioner must fire an incense stick to address clearly his professional title and the titles of his godfather and godmother. Especially, as a *Then* practitioner carries out a ritual, soldiers of his godfather and godmother come to help.

+ Ancestor. They are ancestors of many generations of a *Then* master, including *Then* practitioners who will be mandarins in the heavenly Hả citadel after they die. Thus, when heavenly *Then* mobilize troops and march by Hả citadel, ancestors also send their soldiers to support *Then*. *Then* ancestors are reported by *Then* master before a ritual. Some *Then* masters invite all their ancestors to go with him for rituals, some invite selectively. Besides, during the ritual, a *Then* master must report what he will be doing, and present offerings for his client's ancestors.

The worship gods in *Then* family show the belief of ancestor which is the indigenous belief of the Tày. This is the fundamental element in *Then* belief. Besides, ancestor worship in *Then* also means the worship for grand masters of profession which can be categorized as follow:

+ Ancestor worship of the family in general (including *Then* practitioners of the family since many previous generations).

+ Worship of ancestors who founded the profession of *Then* singing of the family. This means worship for grand masters or magicians (godfather, godmother who transfer the profession for the first *Then* practitioner in the family).

+ Worship of godfather, godmother of the *Then* master (including the dead and the alive).

+ Worship of the grand master of *Then* profession in general (including heavenly mandarins, Father (Jade Emperor) and Mother (Pụt Luông or Bodhisattva Kwan Yin).

Thus, in *Then* belief, the core of worship for grand masters of profession is the worship of Father and Mother which represents for the conception of Yin-Yang of the people of wet rice. However, worship of Father in *Then* is the element which has relation with the appearance of Tào master and Three Religions came after the belief of worshipping Mother.

5. *Then's Soul* (*khoăn đíp* – live soul of *Then*). *Then*, Pụt practitioner's body and soul are separated. The body is on earth while the soul, which is independent from the body, is in the heaven. This means a *Then* master on earth must worship his soul in the heaven.

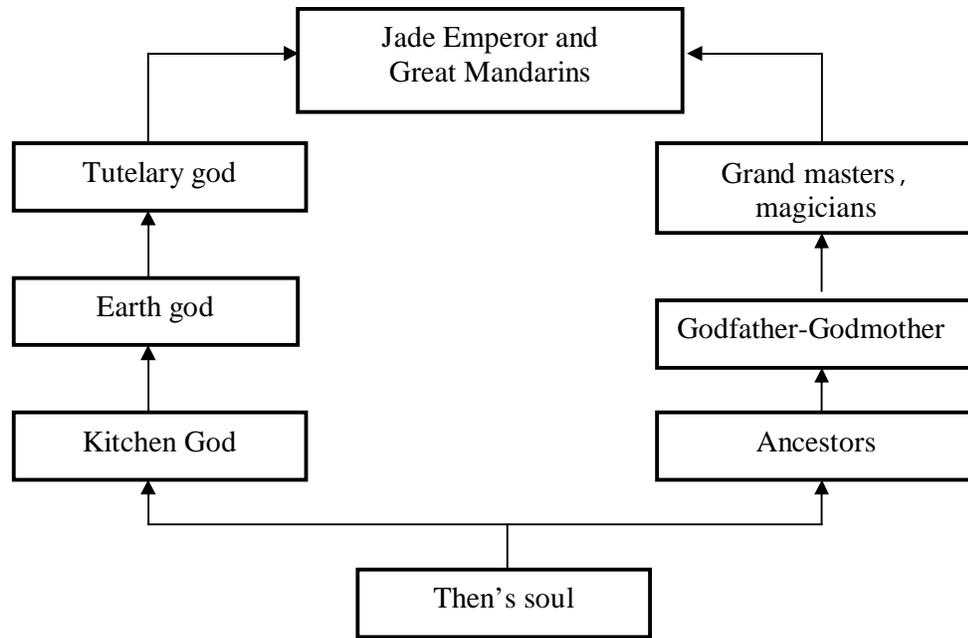
The worship of *Then* soul shows the appearance of Shamanic elements in *Then* belief. It could be said that Shamanism is the source of *Then* belief. Shamanism refers to the ritual masters' ability to communicate with gods via two methods: one is that the god will incarnate into the ritual master, the other is that the ritual master's soul will escape from the body to meet gods. The phenomenon that alive souls of godfather and godmother are worshipped by *Then* masters proves that they have intention to let their soul escape out of the body.

Basically, the Shamanic element in *Then* belief has something in common with other Shamanic forms in the world such as Shamanic master's strange manifestation, rules of the profession, method of communication with gods, etc. However, in specific aspects, there are typical characteristics of Shamanism in the *Then* belief of the Tày⁽³⁾.

The said above pantheon is used directly and permanently for *Then* masters to carry out their profession. In other words, is considered means as well as spiritual foundation for *Then* master to do their job.

A map may be drawn to illustrate the relation between gods on *Then* altar and a *Then* master as follow:

³. See: Nguyễn Thị Yên. "Investigation into Shamanic elements in Then of the Tày", paper at the international of *Mother Worship and Phù Giầy festival*, Hanoi, March 2001.



Therefore, worshipping the profession is an important content in the worshipping system at *Then* master's home. Common points and different points in home worship by *Then* masters in comparison with people who are not practising the profession are:

- Common points: All worship ancestors and gods who protect the family. The different point is that ancestors of *Then* practitioners are professionals. This is meaningful to *Then* practitioners because beside relation from the family perspective, ancestors have the role in supporting their *Then* practice. In the worshipping system of the *Then* masters in Quảng Hòa (Cao Bằng), ancestors are called *Đăm*, having quite important role in the *Then* pantheon.

- Different points: Worship of profession. In the worship of profession, there exists worshipping for Jade Emperor and magical mandarins and the grand professional masters of the family. The grand professional masters of the family have no certain names but including a system of various gods. Thus, it is important to investigate names and origins of the grand masters of profession to understand indigenous and imported elements in *Then* belief.

It is necessary to notice that home worship is the especially important thing to the *Then* masters' professional practice. The *Then* pantheon plays an important role in *Then* masters' work as the most effective means of professional practice. Thus, setting up the altar for the profession is the foremost and compulsory procedure to a

Then practitioner before he officially addresses himself to be a professional. There are professional regulations in worship of grand masters of profession and *Then* practice. For example, *Dàng* masters in Quảng Hòa must be married in order to have a watcher for the home altar when they are working away from home. When a master is practising an out door ritual, for the effective of the job, the wife must continually burn incense sticks at home altar. If the wife is alive, the children can help her to burn the incense sticks. If she dies, the master must instead get married to other because the children cannot help her.

From the investigation of *Then* pantheon, it can be said that *Then* belief consists of various beliefs which can be temporarily categorized as follow:

- Shamanism.

- Indigenous beliefs, including ancestor worship and worship of patron gods who protects the villages and lands.

- Imported beliefs, including Three Religions and the Four Palaces belief of the Kinh.

Therefore, pantheon and *Then* belief system are the results of *Then* belief's development under the impact of social and historical context. That is the development from *Then* as a phenomenon of ancient Shamanism to *Then* belief system with professional features. We can split the development of *Then* belief into these two main stages as follow:

- The first stage: *Then* of the early times was a primitive form of Shamanism of the Tày. At this time, *Then* existed under unprofessional folk ritual which was the same to other folk rituals with Shamanic elements.

- The second stage: Since Tư Thiên Quân Nhạc Bể Văn Phùng and Vừa Ca Đàng Hoàng Quỳnh Vân, mandarins of the Mạc dynasty, established two groups of *Then* singing and *Dàng* singing which were famous for rhythm and words at higher level. Along with trends of upgrading these practices to the imperial level and of making them to be more professional, there appeared a movement of importing other beliefs into *Then* such as Three Religions and Four Palaces from the low land.

What have been presented are a draft of *Then*, a popular belief of the Tày in the mountainous area of the North of Vietnam. More time and works, of course, need to be done in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of *Then*'s pantheon and belief system.