

The Role of Daoism (道教) in the Hungry Ghost Worship Ritual and the Practice of Worshipping Spirits of the Netherworld (Shadow Souls) in Vietnam

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to explore the role of Daoism (道教) in the formation and development of the Hungry Ghost Worship Ritual and the Practice of Worshipping Spirits of the Netherworld (Shadow Souls) in the religious life of Vietnamese people. Based on an interdisciplinary approach, combining religious history, folklore and philosophy, the study clarifies how Daoism (道教) impacts the ritual structure, conceptual system and cosmological order of the Hungry Ghost Worship Ritual and the Practice of Worshipping Spirits of the Netherworld (Shadow Souls) in Vietnam. The results show that Daoism (道教) not only transmitted to Vietnam a system of beliefs about the Soul, ghosts and the invisible world, but also provided a relatively complete ritual model to handle the relationship between the living and homeless wandering spirits (restless spirits). Through the Vietnamization of Daoism (道教) elements, the Vietnamese community has restructured the worship rituals in a way that is suitable for the indigenous cultural environment, from the way of establishing holidays, worship content, ritual process to the mechanism of community cohesion. The study also clarifies the high adaptability of the Hungry Ghosts worship ritual when absorbing many layers of religious influence, including Buddhism, indigenous beliefs and folk practice elements. The analysis shows that this process not only reflects religious interference but also demonstrates the mobility of Vietnamese culture in creating behavioral models towards the underworld, towards harmony between social order and spiritual order. The findings of the study contribute to the understanding of the characteristics of the practice of worshipping Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls) in the context of religious exchange in East Asia.

Keywords: Daoism (道教), Hungry ghosts worship ritual, practice of worshipping spirits of the netherworld (shadow souls), folk ritual, religious exchange.

Introduction

In the context of contemporary Vietnamese cultural life being strongly influenced by the market economy, urbanization and social structure shifts, many folk belief practices continue to maintain their vitality and enduring adaptability (An, 2010). Among them, the Hungry Ghosts worship ritual and the practice of worshipping Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls) are typical examples of the continuous movement of Vietnamese spiritual life. These rituals not only reflect the concept of human life and the invisible world order but also express specific human values such as compassion, the morality of remembering one's roots and the spirit of community with deep indigenous culture (Anh, 1930).

However, the formation and development of these rituals do not simply originate from indigenous traditions but are also the result of a long process of interaction with religious systems imported from China, typically Daoism (道教). This observation is consistent with Maspero's (1981) view that the structure of the spiritual world and rituals of Daoism (道教) have a profound influence on East Asian religious life. In Vietnam, the process of absorbing and localizing Daoism (道教) is taking place strongly, creating belief patterns that are both regional and local. Hinh (1995) also pointed out

that Daoism (道教) was not only accepted by the Vietnamese as an ideology but also as a ritual model, contributing to shaping the way the community behaved with metaphysical forces.

The need for this study comes from the need to more clearly identify the depth of influence of Daoism (道教) in the ritual of worshipping Hungry ghosts and worshipping Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls), which have not been systematically analyzed in current works. Studies on Vietnamese folk beliefs often emphasize the role of Buddhism, Confucianism or indigenous belief practices, while the role of Daoism (道教) is obscured or only mentioned sporadically. Taylor (2004) shows that Vietnamese religious life is characterized by “multi-layered faith”, where imported religions intertwine without being mutually exclusive.

Therefore, examining the influence of Daoism (道教) in the Hungry Ghosts worship ritual helps clarify how beliefs and ritual models are received, integrated and transformed in the Vietnamese cultural environment. This is an issue of important theoretical value because it contributes to expanding the understanding of the structure of Vietnamese beliefs, while also adding to the theory of religious exchange in the Southeast Asian region. In practice, the study helps to more clearly locate the cultural basis of rituals that are widely maintained in the community, creating a foundation for the work of preserving, educating culture and managing religious activities in the contemporary context.

On that basis, the research problem that this article focuses on solving is the nature, scope and mechanism of influence of Daoism (道教) on the formation process of the Hungry ghosts worshipping ritual and the practice of worshipping Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls) in Vietnam. The central question is how the influence of Daoism (道教) has penetrated the structure of the Hungry Ghosts worshipping ritual and how those elements were received and localized by the Vietnamese people to create the current characteristic ritual appearance. This question guides the entire analysis process to identify the traces of Daoism (道教) in the cosmology, philosophy of life, ritual structure and symbolic meaning of the Hungry Ghosts worshipping ritual. At the same time, the study also aims to explain the mechanism of cultural and religious exchange that makes Daoism (道教) elements not only accepted but also alive in today's religious life.

The goal of the study is to clarify the role of Daoism (道教) in the formation and operation of the Hungry Ghosts worship ritual, analyze the process of Vietnamization of Daoism (道教) elements and explain the characteristics of religious exchange in the practice of worshipping Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls) of the Vietnamese people. In addition, the study also aims to determine the cultural values and social meanings that this ritual creates in the community, thereby contributing to expanding the understanding of Vietnamese folk religious life in the context of current cultural change. The main contributions of the study lie in providing a systematic analysis of the influence of Daoism (道教) on the Hungry Ghosts worship ritual, supplementing empirical evidence from ethnographic descriptions in many cultural regions. Vu (2007) has suggested the presence of the Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls) belief in the coastal areas of South Central Vietnam and this study continues to expand that approach by placing the phenomenon within the reference frame of Daoism (道教), thereby pointing out the complexity of intersection and localization.

The research question throughout the article is how Daoism (道教) has participated in the formation of the Hungry Ghosts worship ritual through symbols, rituals and concepts, and what is the localization mechanism that makes these elements become part of the Vietnamese Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls) belief. This is a meaningful question not only for the field of Daoism (道教) research but also for the entire process of understanding Vietnamese religious life in relation to the religious and belief flows in the region.

Literature Review

Research on Daoism (道教) and the influence of Daoism (道教) in the Vietnamese cultural space has formed an important knowledge foundation to approach the issue of Hungry Ghosts worship rituals and the practice of worshipping Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls). However, when systematizing existing works, it can be seen that most of the research focuses on two main directions, including research on Daoism (道教) classics and surveys of Vietnamese folk beliefs in the process of cultural assimilation, while there are not many works directly analyzing the participation of Daoism (道教) in the Hungry Ghosts worship rituals.

The group of classical Daoism (道教) researchers who expanded this knowledge base was Maspero (1981), who demonstrated that the structure of the system of gods, magic and rituals of Daoism (道教) had a comprehensive influence on East Asian religious life. From the explanation of the structure of the metaphysical world, the relationship between fairies, demons, gods and humans to the model of rituals to regulate the operation of supernatural forces, Maspero's contribution created a fundamental cognitive framework to understand the mechanism by which Daoism (道教) can impact the receiving cultures. In Vietnam, Hinh (1995) continued to expand this approach when pointing out that Daoism (道教) was not only introduced as an ideology but also spread into folk beliefs through the system of numerology, divination, sacrifices and the concept of the spirit world. This work is particularly important because it raises the issue of research on the extent and mechanism of Vietnamization of Daoism (道教), creating a premise to consider practices such as worshipping Hungry ghosts in the process of religious exchange.

Along with the research direction of Daoism (道教) origin, works on Vietnamese folk beliefs also create a rich knowledge base to explain the structure and movement of rituals related to Soul and wandering spirit (restless spirit) loneliness. Taylor (2004) describes Vietnamese religious life as a multi-layered reality in which religions and indigenous practices combine to create a flexible and tolerant model. Taylor's idea of multi-layered faith allows to identify the interactive relationship between Daoism (道教) with Buddhism and indigenous beliefs in the process of forming the Hungry ghosts worship ritual. At the level of specific practices, Vu (2007) surveyed the worship of Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls) in the South Central Coast and showed the widespread appearance of this ritual in community life. Although not directly focused on Daoism (道教), Vu's (2007) study described the context in which the rituals took place, the objects of worship, and the symbolic elements, providing an important source of empirical data to analyze the potential impact of Daoism (道教).

In a broader approach to culture and symbolism, classic works such as Geertz (1973) emphasize the role of symbols in the construction of religious meaning. Geertz's theory helps explain why symbols such as Hungry ghosts, Ghost soldiers, the gates of hell, or Taoist ritual altars (Ritual altars) can spread and adapt in the Vietnamese cultural environment. Giau (1983) and Vuong (2003) emphasize the depth of tradition and the stability of the Vietnamese cultural structure, which helps explain the selective reception ability of the Vietnamese people, in which elements that are suitable for the indigenous worldview are easily assimilated. Hai (2012) studies traditional symbols and finds that the images of Soul, the underworld and the bond between the living and the dead are enduring themes, making the process of receiving Daoism (道教) elements in the Hungry Ghosts worship ritual natural and consistent.

The direct research direction on the role of Daoism (道教) in Vietnamese folk beliefs has recently expanded significantly. Van (2022) points out that Daoism (道教) has left a profound influence on

ancestor worship, spirit worship and practices of praying for peace and warding off bad luck. This suggests the possibility that the Hungry Ghosts ritual also reflects similar patterns, as both are concerned with regulating the relationship between the living and the dead. Van (2023) examines Soul worship in a contemporary context and describes the transformations of the Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls) belief, thereby adding a perspective on the movement of ritual in the new social environment. These analyses provide a foundation for questioning the impact of Daoism (道教) in both historical and modern dimensions.

Vu (2023) approaches Daoism (道教) from a philosophical perspective and points out the value and limitations of Laozi's thought in the spiritual life of the world. This interpretation allows for an expanded understanding of the ideological aspect, where Daoist principles such as wu wei, harmony, and natural circulation indirectly shape the notion of yin-yang order and wandering spirit (restless spirit) relationships, which are the basis of the Hungry Ghosts worship practice. In addition, Schipper (1993) studies the Daoism (道教) body and the Taoist ritual system of alchemy, exorcism, and sacrificial altar, making the understanding of the ritual structure of Daoism (道教) more transparent and directly comparable to Vietnamese practices.

In addition to classical academic works, some popular studies, such as the article in *The Conversation* (2017) point out the connection between the image of gods and the image of demons, showing that the religion that a community worships can shape the way they perceive the invisible world. This analysis suggests that the influence of Daoism (道教) can impact the way Vietnamese people imagine Hungry ghosts and the underworld. The descriptions of worship in *Vineyard USA*, although in different contexts, also contribute to suggesting the diversity in the mechanism of ritual formation, thereby creating a comparison for analyzing the Hungry Ghost worship ritual in the frame of reference of Daoism (道教).

From the synthesis of works, it can be seen that many important contributions have been established, including identifying the influence of Daoism (道教) in Vietnamese beliefs, analyzing the movement of the belief in Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls), and describing the structure of folk rituals. However, there are still significant research gaps: First, very few studies directly examine the connection between Daoism (道教) and Hungry Ghost worship, although both areas have been widely studied. Second, existing analyses often separate the two systems of concepts and rituals, which limits the understanding of the localization mechanism of Daoism (道教) in Hungry Ghost worship. Third, studies often focus on describing practices or historical surveys, lacking strong interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks to explain the process of religious adaptation.

Therefore, the next research direction should focus on connecting existing knowledge groups, especially by combining Daoism (道教) textual analysis with ethnographic surveys in areas where Hungry Ghost worship is strongly developed. At the same time, it is necessary to expand the space for comparison between Daoism (道教) elements such as the concept of wandering spirit (restless spirit), the Taoist ritual altar model (Ritual altar), the summoning ritual and the corresponding practices in Vietnamese culture. Such an approach will help clarify the layers of influence not only at the ritual level but also at the ideological and symbolic level (Chau, 2024). Research should also focus on the contemporary transformation of ritual in the context of urbanization and modern media to identify the current role of Daoism (道教) in the belief structure of Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls) in Vietnam. These orientations not only overcome the knowledge gap but also open up the prospect of building a comprehensive theoretical framework to explain the formation and operation of the Hungry Ghosts worship ritual in the East Asian religious exchange.

Research Methodology

The research method is built on the foundation of an interdisciplinary approach to comprehensively explain the role of Daoism (道教) in the Hungry Ghosts worship ritual and the practice of worshipping Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls) in Vietnam. The research combines textual analysis, religious history research, ethnography and symbolic analysis to compare the ideological system and rituals of Daoism (道教) with religious practices in the Vietnamese cultural environment.

First, the study collected and analyzed Daoism (道教) classic texts, traditional ritual texts, and folk descriptions related to the Soul, the underworld, and worship patterns. The textual analysis focused mainly on identifying the structure of the worldview, the system of gods, and ritual patterns to identify elements that could be accepted and localized in Vietnamese culture.

Next, the study applied ethnography methods through participant observation in areas where Hungry Ghosts worship rituals are regularly practiced, such as the South Central Coast, the South, and some urban communities. These observations were supplemented by semi-structured interviews with shamans, ritual practitioners, and community members to collect perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of the meaning of the ritual (the number of interviews was 11 people, coded as PV01-PV11). In addition, the method of symbolic analysis is used to explain the images related to Hungry ghosts, Taoist ritual altar (Ritual altar), food offering and symbolic elements originating from Daoism (道教), thereby pointing out the mechanism of transformation and their adaptability in the Vietnamese environment.

The scientific nature of the method is shown in the close combination of theoretical analysis and practical data, and the use of many different sources of evidence to ensure the objectivity and reliability of the conclusions. The interdisciplinary approach helps the research overcome the limitations of each field, expand the scope of interpretation and discover deeper layers of influence of Daoism (道教) in the ritual structure.

However, the method still has certain limitations. The ethnography survey depends on the context of ritual practice, which varies by time and locality, which can lead to differences in data. In addition, the analysis of Daoism (道教) texts is difficult, partly due to the limitations of the Chinese language, partly because many ancient Daoism (道教) scriptures have been lost or exist in different versions, making it difficult to compare. In addition, the mixed nature of folk beliefs sometimes makes it challenging to clearly determine the influence boundaries of Daoism (道教). However, these limitations do not reduce the scientific value of the research, but on the contrary, show the complexity of the cultural phenomenon being examined.

Research Results

The research results show that the role of Daoism (道教) in the Hungry Ghosts worship ritual and the practice of worshipping Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls) in Vietnam is deeply expressed through three major aspects, including ritual structure, conceptual system and cosmological order. This influence is not one-way but is the result of a centuries-long process of integration and localization, in which Daoism (道教) elements are both accepted and adjusted to suit the local cultural environment. When analyzing Hungry Ghosts worship rituals in many cultural regions, and combining interview data from 11 people, it can be seen that the presence of Daoism (道教) has acted as a frame of

reference to restructure the concept of Soul, the path after death and how to behave with the invisible world.

In terms of ritual structure, many elements from Daoism (道教) rituals have been integrated into Hungry Ghosts worship rituals in Vietnam. Maspero (1981) pointed out that Daoism (道教) established a system of rituals that functioned to regulate the relationship between the living world and the underworld, in which the shaman played the role of an intermediary between the two worlds. When observing rituals in the Northern Delta, South Central and Southern regions, many shamans said that they used prayers, talismans and summoning rituals originating from Daoism (道教). Although they did not directly name them, they always understood that this was the core part that created the effectiveness of the ritual.

In the interview, PV03 affirmed that "calling the spirit, opening the prison door and setting up the Taoist ritual altar (Ritual altar) for wandering spirits (restless spirits) to receive offerings are all based on an ancient sequence that he was taught through many generations" and this sequence can be traced back to the Daoism (道教) rituals of the medieval period. Hinh (1995) argues that this adoption mechanism occurred naturally because Daoism (道教) provided a more complete ritual model than many fragmented indigenous elements, giving the community a consistent method for dealing with the homeless Soul.

When analyzing the ritual process in depth, it can be seen that the hierarchical nature of the steps of preparing the Taoist ritual altar (Ritual altar) bears the clear mark of Daoism (道教) on the order of the universe. From choosing the direction of the altar, preparing pure water, the sacrificial altar of three periods, to the steps of offering incense and offering porridge, all reflect the acceptance of Daoism (道教) on the energy of chi and the operation of invisible forces. This was explained by a shaman in PV06 that for the ritual to be effective, it must be "In harmony with Heaven", meaning in accordance with the flow of chi of heaven and earth, which is the core idea of Daoism (道教). The way of increasing offerings for Hungry ghosts, such as salted rice, thin porridge and paper money, also reflects the influence of the compassionate ideology in the spirit of liberation of wandering spirit (restless spirit) inherent in Daoism (道教) and Buddhism, but the framework of the ceremony is still based on the principles of Daoism (道教).

Regarding the system of concepts, research shows that the influence of Daoism (道教) is especially clear in the way Vietnamese people understand the Soul and the process of Soul movement after death. Schipper (1993) analyzed the Daoism (道教) body system and pointed out the concept of essence and spirit (hun and po), consisting of many parts that can be separated and circulate between the layers of the universe. This idea, when introduced to Vietnam, blended with the indigenous concept of soul, creating a richer belief system about the existence of a lonely Soul. An interview with PV01 reveals that many people believe hungry ghosts are wandering souls that have not been liberated. However, the nature of this wandering stems from the fact that the essence and spirit (hun and po) are not guided to their proper realm (plane) according to the cosmic order.

This is a Daoist (道教) interpretation, different from the purely indigenous concept that only sees wandering souls due to a lack of worshipers. Van (2022) proves that Daoism (道教) has strongly influenced the worship of gods and practices related to human destiny. This is also seen in the explanation of the origin of Hungry Ghosts in the community. Many people believe that sudden deaths cause the Soul to be out of order, cut off from the ancestors and unable to return to its proper realm (plane). This explanation is consistent with the Daoism (道教) cosmological model in which all imperfect phenomena originate from deviations from the natural flow of motion. In the interview with

PV11, it was affirmed that "Hungry ghosts appear because they cannot keep up with the rotation of heaven and earth", showing the profound influence of Daoism (道教) in folk life.

The role of Daoism (道教) is also reflected in the way Vietnamese people imagine the invisible world. Geertz (1973) emphasized that religious symbols can create a worldview and it is the symbol system of Daoism (道教) that provides Vietnamese people with a language to describe the underworld. From images such as prison gates, Ghost soldiers, mandarins and the heavens of hell, many Hungry Ghost worship rituals are built as a dialogue process between the living world and the underworld through the support of shamans. This suggests that the belief structure of Hungry Ghosts does not simply emerge from folk practices but has a cosmological foundation systematized from Daoism (道教).

In coastal communities, Vu (2007) noted that rituals to worship Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls) often appear in places with many river and sea accidents. When analyzing this data in the context of Daoism (道教), it can be seen that the concept of instability of wandering spirits (restless spirits) due to sudden death is consistent with the Daoism (道教) way of explaining the imbalance in fate. Interview with PV04 shows that people believe that Hungry Ghost rituals help "bring wandering spirits (restless spirits) back to the rhythm of heaven and earth", which demonstrates the spread of Daoism (道教) into local practices.

The cosmological order of Daoism (道教) is clearly shown in the way Vietnamese people organize the ritual space. Giau (1983) and Vuong (2003) emphasize that Vietnamese culture absorbs religion by integrating it into the existing cultural structure, creating a harmonious adaptation. Observations show that Hungry Ghost altars are often divided into three levels symbolizing heaven, earth, and human, consistent with the order in Daoism (道教) cosmology. PV02 explains that "the three levels of offerings help wandering spirits (restless spirits) have a direction to move", which reflects how Daoism (道教) ideology is translated into ritual language. Hai (2012) argues that symbols such as pure water, rice, salt, incense, and fire all have the value of regulating the air, helping to restore balance between the two realms (planes). This is completely consistent with the way Daoism (道教) explains the dynamic relationship of the universe.

In the process of practicing the ritual, many factors show the fusion between Daoism (道教) and indigenous beliefs. Taylor (2004) emphasizes that Vietnamese beliefs always operate through a flexible and fusion mechanism, allowing many layers of beliefs to coexist. This explains why in many Hungry Ghosts rituals, practitioners do not clearly distinguish between Daoism (道教) and indigenous beliefs. Interviews with PV07 show that people only consider it as "ancestral rituals", but when analyzing each step, it can be seen that most of the summoning and redress rituals originate from Daoism (道教) rituals.

As assessed by the Conversation (2017), it also helps to reinforce the view that Soul beliefs are strongly influenced by the religious system that the community accepts. When compared to the way of imagining ghosts in Western culture, it can be seen that the Daoism (道教) effect in imagining Hungry ghosts is orderly, functional in the cosmic system and not arbitrary. This is consistent with the way many interviewees interpreted that Hungry ghosts "have their own realm (plane), their own order" as PV09 shared.

The study also shows that the localization factor plays a decisive role in shaping the Vietnamese Hungry Ghost worship ritual. Van (2023) pointed out that the Soul worship custom in Vietnam always changes according to social circumstances. When compared with the Daoism (道教) framework, it can be seen that the ritual models are adjusted by Vietnamese people to suit the community spirit, for

example, the organization of collective worship on the 15th day of the 7th lunar month, reflecting the need to share blessings in the community. Interview with PV05 said that “the villagers worship together so that wandering spirits (restless spirits) do not disturb each house”, showing how Daoism (道教) is reinterpreted in a communal orientation.

The Daoism (道教) ideology throughout the ritual is also expressed in the principle of harmony between humans and nature, especially in the explanation of the purpose of the worship. Vu (2023) analyzed that Laozi's ideology focuses on the harmony between opposing forces. This is expressed in the folk concept that worshipping Hungry ghosts helps reduce the phase difference between yin and yang. Many people in PV10 believe that worshipping Hungry ghosts “keeps cool”, that is, helps to harmonize the energy in the community. This is an interpretation close to the spirit of Laozi.

In Vineyard USA's (nd) analytical framework on the concept of worship, it shows that ritual is not only a means of communication with gods but also a mechanism for creating community. When applied to the Vietnamese context, it can be seen that the Hungry ghost worship is not only aimed at Hungry ghosts but also strengthens social order, increases cohesion and reinforces belief in the protection of heaven and earth. This was confirmed by many participants in the ritual in PV08, when they said that the Hungry Ghost worship “is for the people to have peace”.

From the entire research data, it can be affirmed that Daoism (道教) has strongly impacted the ritual structure, conceptual system and cosmological order of the Hungry ghost worshipping practice and the worship of Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls) in Vietnam. Daoism (道教) elements are localized flexibly, while integrating into Vietnamese tradition, creating a systematic ritual with philosophical depth and continuing to maintain strong vitality in contemporary life.

Discussion

The research results show that the role of Daoism (道教) in the Hungry ghost worshipping ritual and the worship of Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls) in Vietnam is not only expressed through ritual elements but also deeply influences the way the community constructs its worldview, outlook on life and cosmological order. In this discussion, the comparison between the theoretical framework, ethnographic data and interview results from PV01 to PV11 allows us to confirm that the penetration of Daoism (道教) into Vietnamese beliefs takes place through the mechanism of interference and reproduction, not passive absorption.

From the perspective of cultural structure theory, Geertz (1973) emphasized that religions create symbolic systems to establish a sense of order in the world. When applied to the Vietnamese context, it can be seen that the Daoism (道教) symbolic system has provided the community with an interpretive framework to explain phenomena related to the lonely Soul and the operation of the underworld. This helps to explain why in interviews with PV03 and PV09, ritual practitioners often view Hungry ghosts as an orderly force, with a hierarchical system and can be summoned by certain methods.

Maspero's (1981) idea of the systematic nature of the Daoism (道教) spiritual world is an important suggestion to explain the similarity between Daoism (道教) rituals and Hungry Ghosts worship rituals. Daoism (道教) constructs a multi-layered universe, each with its own functions and rules. When Daoism (道教) rituals penetrated Vietnamese culture, the Vietnamese adopted this structure and transformed it to suit local values. Interviews with PV06 showed that many shamans considered the three-layered sacrificial altar as a manifestation of the principle of heaven, earth, and man, clearly reflecting the Vietnamization of Daoism's (道教) concept of the universe. This shows that the reception is not a copy of the original but a smooth combination of foreign ideological structures

and local cultural environments. The role of Daoism (道教) in shaping the concept of Soul is relatively clearly shown in the integration of the concepts of essence and spirit (hun and po).

Schipper (1993) describes the Daoism (道教) ideology of the body and Soul, consisting of many parts that can move through the spatial layers. When analyzing the interviews with PV01 and PV11, it can be seen that many people explain that Hungry ghosts are Souls lost from the cosmic order, not returning to the realm (plane) they should belong to. This interpretation clearly bears the mark of Daoism (道教), because the previous indigenous concept of Soul is often associated with the break in blood relations or worship, not mentioning the cosmic phase difference. Hinh (1995) believes that it is the cosmological element of Daoism (道教) that has created a strong theoretical foundation for Vietnamese people to interpret metaphysical phenomena, thereby enriching the indigenous belief structure.

The practice of Hungry Ghost worship in localities shows a strong syncretic nature. Vu (2007) surveyed the South Central region and found the presence of rituals such as calling wandering spirits (restless spirits), sacrificial altars to absolve grievances, and offering porridge to the dead. When comparing these rituals with Daoism (道教) rituals, significant similarities in content and sequence can be seen. Interview data from PV02 and PV04 showed that people believed that worshipping Hungry ghosts could "bring wandering spirits (restless spirits) back to order" and "help them settle down where they should be," which is reminiscent of the natural operating principle in Daoism (道教) thought. Vuong (2003) and Vuong et al. (2018) emphasized that Vietnamese culture absorbs foreign elements by blending them into existing structures, helping to create a highly adaptable belief model. This explains why Daoism (道教) rituals are not considered foreign but are interpreted as part of Vietnamese tradition.

An important point in the discussion is that the localization of Daoism (道教) takes place not only at the ritual level but also at the philosophical level. Vu (2023) analyzes the value of Laozi's ideology and argues that the principle of harmony and return to natural order is one of the pillars of Daoism (道教). When applied to the Hungry Ghost worship ritual, it can be seen that many practitioners see the worship not only as charity but also as an act to help restore the balance between invisible forces. Interview with PV10 shows that many people believe that worshipping Hungry ghosts helps "cool the whole neighborhood", which reflects how Daoism (道教) ideology is Vietnamized into a mechanism to create harmony for the community. Hai (2012) and Long & Van (2019) also mentioned that symbols such as pure water, fire, rice and salt all have the function of regulating energy, showing the connection between Daoism (道教) ideology and folk practice.

In the contemporary context, the role of Daoism (道教) in the Hungry Ghosts worship ritual continues to be reinforced through the transformation and adaptation of the ritual itself. Van (2023) noted that the worship of Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls) is changing with the urbanization environment and the impact of modern media. However, the core elements bearing the mark of Daoism (道教) are still retained as a stable main component. Interviews with PV08 showed that although young people do not have a deep understanding of Daoism (道教), they still maintain the worship because they believe that "if you worship, your home will be safe"; that is, they continue to maintain a model of belief based on the concept of yin-yang balance. This demonstrates that the influence of Daoism (道教) has become an endogenous component in Vietnamese culture.

Comparisons with international studies show theoretical compatibility when considering the role of religion in the visualization of the metaphysical world. The Conversation (2017) points out that

the way people imagine ghosts depends strongly on the pantheon they believe in. This helps explain why the image of Hungry ghosts in Vietnamese culture is not random but is shaped as an orderly force, linked to the cosmological framework of Daoism (道教). This is clearly different from the image of ghosts in Western religious traditions.

From the perspective of religious sociology, it can be seen that the Hungry Ghost worship ritual has the function of regulating social relationships through dealing with the invisible world. Vineyard USA sees worship as a mechanism to create community connections. When applied to Vietnamese practice, it can be seen that the Hungry Ghost worship ritual not only meets religious needs but also contributes to strengthening social cohesion. Interviews with PV05 and PV07 both show that the traditional Hungry Ghost worship ritual is often organized on a community scale to ensure peace for the entire population.

The intersection between Daoism (道教) and indigenous beliefs in the Hungry Ghost worship ritual demonstrates the mobility of Vietnamese culture in receiving and recreating regional ideological streams. The research results show that Daoism (道教) has not only provided a theoretical model of the universe but also provided a ritual framework for the community to deal with the relationship with the homeless Soul. When these elements were localized and recreated, the Hungry Ghosts worship ritual became a part of Vietnamese traditional customs, both regional and with a distinct identity. This proves that cultural exchange is not a process of dissolution but a co-creation of the local community in forming a unique religious practice.

Conclusion

The study of the role of Daoism (道教) in the Hungry Ghosts worship ritual and the practice of worshiping Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls) in Vietnam affirms that Daoism (道教) has permeated Vietnamese religious life deeply and sustainably. The results show that the influence of Daoism (道教) is clearly manifested in three key aspects, including ritual structure, conceptual system and cosmological order. The rituals of summoning, sacrificial altar, alms-giving and praying for redress of grievances have many elements similar to the ritual models of Daoism (道教). At the same time, the way Vietnamese people imagine the lost Soul, the underworld and the principle of balance between heaven and earth reflects the selective acceptance of Daoism (道教) ideology and its integration into indigenous traditions. Thanks to that, the Hungry Ghosts worship ritual is not a discrete phenomenon but is structured as an orderly system, both sacred and social. The significance of the study is to clarify the interaction mechanism between Daoism (道教) and folk beliefs, and at the same time, contribute to identifying the cultural depths of the practice of worshiping Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls) in the current context. The study provides further evidence for the argument that Vietnamese culture has a strong ability to integrate, turning foreign elements into part of its religious identity. These findings are not only useful for the field of folk religion research but also have reference value in preserving cultural heritage and managing contemporary religious activities. However, the study is still limited as the scope of the survey has not covered all cultural regions and has not fully assessed the ritual documents of ancient Daoism (道教). In the future, studies need to expand field surveys, combine comparative analysis between regions and pay more attention to the localization process over time. Building a comprehensive interdisciplinary theoretical framework will contribute to a more complete picture of the belief in Spirits of the netherworld (Shadow souls) in Vietnamese cultural life.

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