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Appraisal of the *Then* Belief's Preservation in Vietnam Through a *Pang Then* Ritual of the *Tày* People in Lào Cai Province

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Abstract

Vietnam has fifty-four distinct groups. Religious beliefs have always played a significant role in every Vietnamese ethnic group. *Then*¹ is a form of ritual belief system of *Tày*, *Nùng*, and *Thái* ethnic groups in Northern Vietnam's mountainous provinces. Then ritual practices can take place with different purposes. Each Then ritual is identified with a unique integration of music, dance, fine arts and language. In this paper, we would like to describe a *Pang Then* ceremony, which celebrates rank advancement of a Then master. During 3 days, the Then master sings and plays *Tính Tầu* (a long-necked lute with a gourd body and two or three silk strings) at the same time. The lyric of song is narrating the path to the Realm of Heaven of the Then master and his spirited Then soldiers. At the end of the third day, all participants take part in the festivities: singing, dancing and drinking. Not only are the rituals preserved, but also the unique art of Then belief is separated. Then music and dance has eventually become a form of entertainment art in daily life. Every 2 years, a national festival of Then singing with *Tính Tầu* has been organized. Some new works based on the Then original tunes is performed in these festivals.

Keywords: Then Ritual, Vietnamese Culture, Intangible Cultural Heritage, the *Tày* People

Vietnam is a multi-ethnic country with fifty-four distinct groups. Each of them has their own typical traditional culture and, of course, their own folk religion. Religious beliefs have always played a significant role in every Vietnamese ethnic community, hence they have strong influence in their daily matters. In this paper, we would like to present our study on *Then*, which is a form of ritual from *Then* the belief system of *Tày*, *Nùng*, and *Thái* ethnic groups in Northern Vietnam's mountainous provinces.

According to the people from the mentioned ethnic groups, it is an incomplete spiritual life for each community and for each family without the *Then* rituals. *Then* ritual practices can take place with different purposes, such as celebrating a marriage or a newly built house, praying for good crops, for good health or for pregnancy, performing a medical treatment, seeking quiet, etc. The ritual performances require the appearance of those

¹ *Then* is pronounced like "ten" in English.

called *Then masters*, who are believed to have a special ability to communicate with deities and make prayers come true.

In addition to the common *Then* rituals, there are also special *Then* rituals performed for the *Then masters*. These ceremonies remark major stages during their career, for instance, an official acknowledgement of a *Then apprentice*, after which he/she is allowed to practice the *Then* profession, a *Then master's* promotion from a lower rank to a higher rank and an announce of *Then master's* retirement (due to old age). They are considered the uppermost large-scale *Then* celebrations, and also great festive occasions of a whole village. The rituals usually last from three to five days with the participation and witness of the *Then practitioners* and the community.

Each *Then* ritual is identified with a unique integration of music, dance, fine arts and language. By these elements, we could understand, to some extent, the outlook on life, the worldview and the aesthetics of the *Tày*, *Nùng* and *Thái* people in Vietnam. For more details, we would like to introduce a case of the great *Then* ritual, called *Pang Then*, which celebrates rank advancement of a *Then master*. The following description is the result of our experience with the *Pang nó* – a subtype of the *Pang Then* – for a young master from Van Ban, Lao Cai, Vietnam, whose name is Chu Hồng Phương.

Then master Chu Hồng Phương was born on July 19th, 1994 and was destined to be a *Then master* (following the ethnic cultural belief). Chu Hồng Phương then became a *Then master* in 2011. By 2017, he had 338 “willing children” (followers) who before had recovered from their illness by his treatment ritual and, since then, assisted him on demand, and nearly 2000 believers who invited him to hold *Then* rituals in their private houses. With these numbers of believers and followers, *Then master* Chu Hồng Phương was qualified to perform the *Pang nó* ritual, after which a *Then master* is believed to become more powerful, and the number of spirited *Then* soldiers and horses would increase to support his/her *Then* professional practices.



Then master Chu Hồng Phương - Photo by Nguyễn Danh Long

A day before the main ritual, people set up and decorated the *Xăng bjoóc* tree in the *Then master's* house. As traditional faith, this tree is the symbol of a link between the dead and the living. Under the tree, farming products were presented, and then offered to the Realm of Heaven by the *Then master*. The main ritual proceeded in three days with the support from a *Mật master*² and his assistants, *Then master's* assistants, *Mo master*, a

² Since there are no *Then masters* who have enough power to perform the *Pang nó*, the ritual will call for a *Mật master*, who is from a different belief system, but fulfils the necessary requirements.

dance group and an ensemble. The assistants of this master involved three people: a *pi*³ player and two *Nàng Mât*, who are female supporters of the master. The assistants of the *Then* master were ladies, called *Nàng Then*. Besides the *Mât* and the *Then masters* and their assistants, the participants of the ritual also included dance group and an ensemble. The music ensemble in this *Then* ritual consisted of members of percussion family as *bằng bu*⁴, *đuống*⁵, *ma hình*⁶ and drum.

The first day of the *Pang nó* started with several worshipping rites: to the God of the Area “*Thổ địa*” (Tudigong/Tudishen/Tudi), to the Tutelary of the Village “*Thành Hoàng làng/Thần Thành Hoàng*” (Chenghuangshen) and to the ancestors of the *Then master*. They were performed outdoors by a Mo master, asking for permission to let the *Then master* hold a *Pang Then* ritual. After that, the crucial part of the *Pang nó* began. It was a storytelling song, narrating a march to the Deities of the *Then master* and his spirited *Then* soldiers with their offerings. Their path to the Realm of Heaven was comprised of the following sections, each of which was played as the night wore on:

* *1st section: The Then master with his soldiers arrived at the Realm of Heaven and met “Quan Hành Khiển”⁷. The Then master informed him about the Then rank promotion, and then, was permitted to wear his new-ranked (mandarin) surcoat.*

* *2nd section: The Then master with his soldiers reported on the Pang nó to the Father of Then at his palace in the Realm of Heaven.*

* *3rd section: The Then masters with his soldiers, finally, got an approval from the “Nam Tào”⁸ to upgrade to a higher Then rank in the Realm of Heaven.*

It is a religious notion that on the way to the Realm of Heaven the dance group would go first and pave the way for the master and his soldiers to have things gone swimmingly. At the end of the main ceremony, the *Pang nó* participants and the villagers, altogether, took part in the festivities: singing, dancing and drinking *Cần* wine⁹ around the *Xăng bjooc* tree.



*Scarf dancing around Xăng bjooc tree
Photo by Nguyễn Danh Long*

³ *Pi* is a kind of bamboo reed flute of the *Thái*.

⁴ *Bằng bu* is a bamboo percussion performed by striking on the ground

⁵ *Đuống* is a kind of wooden percussions consisting of a large boat-shaped mortar and pestles, which originally is *Thái* rice pounding equipment

⁶ *Ma hình* is a kind of shaken idiophones

⁷ “*Quan Hành Khiển*” is a mandarin who has the role as a scholar-bureaucrat of the Jade Emperor.

⁸ “*Nam Tào*” is Vietnamese name of Southern Cross constellation, who records all human births for the Jade Emperor, in Chinese conception.

⁹ *Cần* wine a kind of wine contained in a big jar, and is consumed through a small long bamboo straw.

Everybody joyfully danced, re-performed their daily activities and played their traditional games, for example, tilling the soil, selling goods, picking bamboo sprouts, throwing “*còn*”¹⁰ through a ring. Afterwards, people took down the offerings around the *Xăng bjoóc*, vied for ornaments hung on the tree, and threw eggs and flowers to each other for good fortune. The great *Pang nó* ritual then ended.



The Then master and people dance and re-perform work in daily life

Photo by Nguyễn Danh Long

Nowadays, the *Then* rituals are maintained spontaneously in the *Tày*, *Nùng*, and *Thái* communities. In order to perform the *Pang nó* successfully, as previously explained, the neighbours and the villagers gathered at the *Then* master's house and helped him prepare for the ritual some months earlier. The *Then* master's family had paid for this ritual a huge expense on the offerings and the public feast, approximately 10,000 US dollars. However, it is not a matter for them, because their community is brought closer together after each time *Then* ritual is performed.

Not only are the rituals preserved, but also the unique art of *Then* belief is separated. *Then* music and dance has eventually become a form of entertainment art in daily life, so-called the Art of *Then* singing with *Đàn Tính* (a long-necked lute with a gourd body and two or three silk strings used by the *Tày*, *Nùng*, and *Thái* ethnic groups). From 2005 to 2018, six national festivals of *Then* singing with *Đàn Tính* have been organized. The festivals are opened for both amateur and professional artists, especially *Then* masters. In the festivals, these artists put in their best performance of beautiful musical pieces and dances, which can be original or adapted, from the *Then* rituals. Additionally, some new works based on the *Then* original tunes were performed in these festivals.

According to the general inventory of *Then* heritage practices in 2017, there are total 802 *Then* folk artists, including 221 males and 581 females, in Vietnam. Besides this number, there are 127 groups or clubs with more than 3000 amateurs and professionals, who perform the Art of *Then* singing with *Đàn Tính*. This proves the undeniable vitality of the *Then* among *Tày*, *Nùng*, and *Thái* communities of Vietnam. Hopefully, the *Then* art of the *Tày*, *Nùng*, and *Thái* ethnic groups would soon be recognized by UNESCO in their Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritages of Humanity.

¹⁰ *Còn* is a sacred ball made from cloth, stuffed with seeds and decorated with colorful fringes on its four corners.

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