

Exploring Mazu Worship at Fujian Assembly Hall in Hoi An, Vietnam*

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Hoi An Ancient Town in Vietnam is not only a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) World Heritage Site but also a convergence point of traditional and modern cultures. Throughout its historical transitions, the cultural heritage of Hoi An Ancient Town has been well preserved and developed, and the worship of Mazu, an essential component of Hoi An's culture, is no exception. As far as is known, Hoi An in central Vietnam houses the most Mazu temples, including the Chung Wah Hall, the Guangzhou Assembly Hall, the Fujian Assembly Hall, the Teochew Assembly Hall, and the Hainan Assembly Hall, among others, with the Fujian Assembly Hall being the most vibrant center of Mazu worship. This study employs field surveys and literature research to explore the Mazu worship practices at the Fujian Assembly Hall in Hoi An, Quang Nam Province, Vietnam.

Keywords: Mazu worship, Hoi An, Vietnam, Chinese community

Introduction of Mazu Worship in Hoi An City

Hoi An, situated at the downstream of the Thu Bon River, the largest river in Quang Nam Province, Vietnam, serves as the eastern gateway to the province, holding significant strategic importance. Due to its advantageous geographical location and abundant resources, Hoi An has been a preferred settlement and trading hub for the Chinese since the late 16th to early 17th centuries (Nguyen, 2018). With the migration of the Chinese to Hoi An, they brought along their rich Chinese culture, which amalgamated with the indigenous Vietnamese culture that had existed for centuries, resulting in the creation of a unique cultural landscape. Particularly, as the process of the formation and integration of the Chinese community in Vietnam unfolded, they also introduced spiritual and religious beliefs. The worship of Mazu, the Goddess of the Sea, followed a process of integration and exchange with local beliefs, creating subtle distinctions and fostering an immensely rich and diverse cultural panorama.

Mazu is revered not only as the sea goddess who protects fishermen but also as a deity who brings wealth, prosperity, and protects children. Initially, the worship of Mazu was introduced to Hoi An by the Chinese

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immigrant community and was conducted at the Jinshan Temple (now the Fujian Assembly Hall). According to historical records, this assembly hall was built in 1697, during a period of prosperity in Hoi An as a bustling port city, attracting an increasing number of Fujian merchants to settle in Hoi An. Consequently, they purchased this Buddhist temple and constructed an assembly hall for the veneration of ancestors and deities, and as a gathering place for fellow compatriots.

The Mazu Worship in the Fujian Assembly Hall of Hoi An City

The History of Fujian Assemble Hall of Hoi An City

The Fujian Assemble Hall in Hoi An was established by Fujian residents who migrated to Hoi An with the purpose of venerating deities and sages, as well as serving as a meeting place for fellow Fujianese. Also known as the Jinshan Temple, it was built during the Kangxi period in 1697. In 1757, Fujian merchants purchased the Buddhist temple and converted it into a tiled-roof hall, transforming it into a Chinese assemble hall where deities such as Tianhou (Mazu) were worshipped (Tran, 2005). According to the *Inscription on the Front Gate Plaque about the Reconstruction of the Assembly Hall* in 1974, the assembly hall underwent several renovations: the first in 1792, renaming it as “Minshang Assembly Hall”. The second renovation took place in 1849, expanding the hall to enshrine the Six Generals. The third renovation occurred from 1895 to 1900, renaming it as “Fujian Assembly Hall”. The fourth renovation took place from 1971 to 1974, involving the construction of the main gate and the renovation of the San Guan Gate. The last restoration was in 1993, as inscribed on the second beam of the main hall, “In the autumn, 1993, Fujian was restored”. The Fujian Assembly Hall received recognition from the King of Nguyen in 1918. The Ministry of Culture of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam awarded it a Cultural Heritage Certificate on February 17, 1990.

Overview of the Fujian Assembly Hall in Hoi An City

The Fujian Assembly Hall in Hoi An City faces south and covers an area of 2,000 square meters. From Tran Phu Street to Phan Chau Trinh Street, the layout unfolds sequentially: San Guan Gate, Front Courtyard, Front Hall, Main Hall, Rear Courtyard, Rear Hall. The main entrance of the San Guan Gate is marked by a plaque inscribed with the words “Fujian Assembly Hall”, while the back of the plaque bears a tablet inscribed with the words “Unity and Sincerity”. Upon entering, one encounters a courtyard adorned with potted flowers and plants. Ascending the steps, the front courtyard is revealed, featuring common Chinese garden elements such as rockeries, fountains, stone lion sculptures, and walls decorated with traditional Chinese motifs such as dragons, tortoises, phoenixes, Qilins, and fish.

The architecture of the Front Hall, known as Jinshan Temple, is grand and majestic, with double-eaved glazed tiles in vibrant colors. The roof ridge is adorned with carved dragons, while the doors and windows feature intricate hollowed-out carvings. The ceramic figures are also exquisitely detailed and lifelike. Moving forward, one arrives at the Main Hall, dedicated to the worship of Mazu, the revered deity of the Fujian people. The Main Hall exudes solemnity and grandeur, with an ancient yet magnificent charm. It is a place of perpetual incense burning, with a unique style of spiral incense descending from the roof in an umbrella shape. In addition to Mazu, the Main Hall also enshrines other deities such as Qianliyan (Thousand-Mile Eye), Shunfenger (With-the-Wind Ear), the Six Generals, Yunxian, Qiongxia, and Jinhua Niangniang. Furthermore, the hall houses a large red ancient sailing ship model, several meters in length, commemorating the ancestors who crossed the seas in ancient times.

Between the Main Hall and the Rear Hall lies a small courtyard with a fish pond. Crossing this courtyard leads to the Rear Hall, where deities such as the God of Wealth, the God of Land, venerable ancestors, and the Twelve Fairy Mothers (who oversee childbirth) are worshipped. Additionally, there is an altar in the assembly hall to honor those who contributed funds to build the Fujian Assembly Hall in the past.

Ceremonies at the Fujian Assembly Hall of Hoi An

The Fujian Assembly Hall serves as a place for people to engage in “spiritual communication” with Mazu, aiming to fulfill desires for lifelong protection. Chinese people often pray to Mazu for health, wealth, and family safety. When their wishes are granted, they make offerings to express gratitude. Offerings vary based on individuals’ internal feelings and economic situations. Some offer clothes, some offer roasted pigs, some offer baskets of fruits... and some offer money. The assembly hall in Hoi An is also a place where many indigenous people (mostly women) pray for peace and wealth. Vietnamese people refer to the goddess as “Mother” and also address her as “Holy Mother” during prayers. To engage in “spiritual communication” with the Holy Mother, Vietnamese people also follow the ways of the Chinese. For example, when protection is needed, they offer large incense coils (conical in shape, about one meter high) to the Heavenly Mother, accompanied by requests for her blessings. These incense coils take about three months to burn out. If their wishes are fulfilled, they come to worship and give thanks to the Holy Mother; if not, they burn incense again to pray for blessings. Currently, there are multiple rows of incense coils from both Vietnamese and Chinese people, extending from the front hall entrance to the main hall.

The most significant belief activity in the worship of Mazu is the commemoration of her birthday—a grand ceremony held annually on the twenty-third day of the third lunar month to commemorate and give thanks for the virtues of Mazu, the Holy Mother. The Mazu birthday ceremony in Fujian Assembly Hall is held from the twenty-second to the twenty-third day of the lunar third month. On the twenty-second, the council members and association members clean the association, arrange flowers, fruits, and pastries on the altar, prepare incense and fire for worship, and decorate the association. They also select individuals to bathe Mazu, using clean water to bathe the statue and meticulously wipe it with towels, then change its clothes and various accessories. The clothes and accessories worn by Mazu are all offerings from believers, and the council does not need to purchase them. On the morning of the twenty-third, organizers also prepare some essential traditional offerings, such as roasted whole pig, Fujian fried noodles, Fujian steamed buns, braised pork, and the three sacrifices (pork, fish, and raw chicken eggs). The fish offered are mainly sea fish, steamed whole and placed in bowls and plates. Other deities on the altar are offered glutinous rice, fruits, candies, and cookies. In front of the association, they also set up a table to worship the lonely souls and the land deity. The twenty-third of March is the official worship day, where the council and some members of the association are responsible for specific matters, and the main worship is generally led by the gang leader. The main ceremony begins at 9:00 a.m., with descendants of the gang and invited guests lining up to worship Mazu in front of the hall. The organizers of the event are generally elderly males, dressed in white robes, and the main worship also wears traditional Chinese white robes. After three drumbeats, the worship ceremony begins, followed by three rounds of incense and kneeling. The gang leader then adjusts his clothes, moves forward, and reads the sacrificial text. Afterwards, representatives and guests offer incense, followed by descendants of the gang and other gang members. After the ceremony of seeking blessings, the roasted whole pig used for worship will be cut into small pieces, sprinkled with a little salt, and used to entertain fellow townsfolk and guests at a banquet (Phan, 2018). The ritual of Mazu worship proceeds as

follows: (1) Everyone stands solemnly, (2) Main worship takes position, (3) Accompanying worship takes position, (4) Bell and drum sound together, (5) Incense is lit, (6) Wine is offered, (7) Roasted pig is presented, (8) Three bows to Mazu, (9) Reading of sacrificial text, (10) Burning of gold foil, (11) Three bows to Mazu again, (12) Firecrackers are set off, and the ceremony concludes.

In the ceremony of Mazu worship, besides the Chinese, there are also many Vietnamese participants, with the majority being women. They come here to pray for peace and prosperity from the Heavenly Mother. After the ceremony, they will hold a reception to welcome guests and reunite with fellow compatriots. The afternoon and evening of the festival are filled with traditional cultural activities for the Chinese community, such as organizing banquets and meetings between Chinese associations and between Chinese and Vietnamese people; organizing auctions for lanterns and other donated items to raise funds for charity; holding raffles; and organizing cultural events such as Chinese singing competitions, lion dance competitions, etc. These cultural activities have attracted a large number of people from China and Vietnam to participate, creating a lively, comfortable, healthy, open, and friendly atmosphere in the sacred space of Mazu worship.

Value of the Chinese Worship of Mazu in Hoi An City

The worship of Mazu is an integral part of the spiritual life of the Chinese community in Hoi An, Vietnam, and even the entire population of Hoi An. Worshipping deities such as Mazu helps residents, especially seafarers and merchants, feel secure in their business endeavors (Doan & Nguyen, 2021). As a cultural element, the Mazu belief embodies the exchange and integration of Vietnamese and Chinese cultures. As it spreads and integrates into Hoi An, the Mazu belief has contributed to the creation of a rich and diverse belief system for the residents of the old town. In addition to its spiritual value, the Mazu worship of the Chinese community in Hoi An, Vietnam, also serves as an important source of historical, social, and cultural information for the community.

Conclusion

Hoi An is the result of the integration of cultures throughout history in an international trading port. Consequently, cultural exchanges and integration in Hoi An are particularly strong, especially between Vietnamese and Chinese cultures. The belief in Mazu is vividly expressed through the architecture and religious activities of the Fujian Assembly Hall. The worship of Mazu is a beautiful and unique feature of the culture of the Chinese community in Hoi An, and even the entire Hoi An community. It not only holds historical, social, and cultural artistic value but also carries immense spiritual significance.

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