



APPROACHING THE BELIEF OF THANH HOANG IN SOUTHEASTERN VIETNAM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FUNCTIONAL THEORY

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Abstract:

The belief in Thanh Hoang (tutelary deities) is an important part of the spiritual life of Vietnamese village communities. This article focuses on analyzing the belief in Thanh Hoang in the Southeast region of Vietnam not only as a folk religious phenomenon but also as a specific socio-cultural institution reflecting the needs for organization and stability of the community life of Vietnamese residents during their migration and settlement in the Southeast region. Based on fieldwork at two typical communal houses, Tan Lan communal house (Dong Nai Province) and Tan An communal house (Binh Duong Province), the author analyzes the typical functions of this belief from the functionalist approach of Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski to clarify the prominent functions of the Thanh Hoang belief, including: This psychological function reflects the community's reliance on the supernatural protection of Thanh Hoang deities as a source of spiritual reassurance; the community cohesion function, maintaining order, organizing festival activities, educating morality and shaping local cultural values, fostering village solidarity, and expressing a sense of origin.

Keywords: Vietnamese tutelary deity belief, functional theory, role

1. Introduction

Vietnamese culture was formed and developed on the foundation of a wet rice agricultural civilization, in which natural elements played a vital role in the survival and development of the community. In that context, folk beliefs, especially the belief in the worship of village tutelary deity – held a central position in the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people. The worship of tutelary deity is not simply a religious ritual but also a way for residents to express their deep belief in supernatural powers capable of protecting and regulating the uncertain elements of nature such as weather, crops,

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epidemics, and other disasters – factors that always threatened the safety and livelihoods of agricultural residents

From the perspective of functional anthropology, the belief in the worship of tutelary deity can be interpreted as a belief system with distinct social functions, not only maintaining the spiritual stability of the community but also contributing to the creation, preservation, and transmission of traditional socio-cultural values. Through the lens of functional theory proposed by Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, it can be seen that this belief operates as an essential mechanism to maintain social order, strengthen community identity, and simultaneously meet the spiritual and social needs of individuals within a traditional rural community.

In the context of the strong integration and transformation of contemporary Vietnamese society, especially in the Southeast region – which is undergoing rapid and extensive urbanization – the belief in the worship of Thanh Hoang is facing significant challenges. Changes in demographic structure, lifestyles, and social organization models are gradually fading traditional belief institutions. However, it is precisely in this context that the re-identification of the social and cultural functions of the Thanh Hoang belief becomes even more urgent. It not only helps us better understand the operating mechanisms of traditional culture in modern society but also creates a premise for the preservation and promotion of local cultural values as an inseparable part of national identity.

Therefore, the central research question posed is: What role does the belief in the worship of Thanh Hoang, in its current social structure and functions, play in maintaining and reproducing the socio-cultural life of contemporary Southeastern Vietnamese residents? Exploring and answering this question is not only of academic significance but also has profound practical value in formulating appropriate cultural policies aimed at sustainable development based on the preservation of national cultural identity.

2. Research Methodology

This article employs the method of document analysis and synthesis combined with functional theory in sociology, primarily drawing from scholars such as Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. Additionally, ethnographic fieldwork methods were used to reinforce empirical evidence in the localities of Dong Nai Province and Binh Duong Province where the worship of Thanh Hoang is practiced.

3. Research Objectives

- To propose a theoretical approach to the study of traditional belief phenomena.
- To apply functionalist theory in offering a new understanding of Vietnamese folk beliefs in general.

- To clarify the role and social functions of the Tutelary Deity belief in the community life of the Southeastern region of Vietnam.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Theoretical Basis of Functionalism According to Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown

Functional theory, also known as functionalism, is a theoretical school founded by British social anthropologists. This school developed a unique ethnographic method based on participant observation. Functionalism encompasses two main theoretical strands with different emphases: “functionalism”, associated with the ideas of Malinowski (1884-1942) and “structural-functionalism”, linked to the ideas of Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955).

4.1.1 Malinowski's Functionalist Theoretical Perspective

Malinowski emphasized the role of individual behaviors within society. He argued that individual behaviors contribute to the maintenance and operation of society. To understand the impact of individual behavior, Malinowski introduced the concept of the “practical function” of a behavior.

In his research on the life of the Trobriand Islanders in the Pacific, Malinowski emphasized that ritual contains a psycho-physiological function, reassuring the spirit and helping local residents, who had limited rational scientific knowledge, to be psychologically stable when facing dangers and uncertainties in life (specifically when fishing offshore). On this basis, Malinowski argued that in societies with environments that are more fraught with danger and uncertainty, where life faces precariousness, people need miraculous rituals and magical incantations even more as an alternative spiritual choice.

According to Malinowski, the “practical function” of a behavior refers to the influences that contribute to human survival, including meeting survival needs such as eating, reproduction, and energy production. Behaviors that contribute to these functions are necessary for the existence and development of society.

He strongly advocated for long-term fieldwork, maintaining close and prolonged contact with informants who assist in the research. Malinowski's perspective stemmed from ethnographic descriptive information and was not simply a comparison between cultures, which gave his viewpoint several advantages. Malinowski argued that customs have an organic connection with the rest of culture, and that fieldwork must study the “invisible realities” that govern the interrelationships between different aspects of social organization.

Overall, Malinowski's functionalist theoretical perspective made a significant contribution to sociology, particularly in identifying the function and importance of individual behaviors for the survival and development of society.

According to Malinowski's view, beliefs are core elements of human needs. They create a system of values and provide direction for the behavior of individuals and the

community. Therefore, in studying the belief in Thanh Hoang deities in the Southeast region of Vietnam, one can explore how local devotees seek comfort, support, and meaning in life through worship activities, rituals, and other beliefs related to the Thanh Hoang deities. It is possible to study how this belief helps people in the community construct a meaning for their lives, helping them create a sense of security and direction for their behavior.

4.1.2 Radcliffe-Brown's Structural Functionalist Theoretical Perspective

This is a sociological theory that developed in the 20th century. According to this perspective, social structure and function are important factors in understanding and explaining social phenomena. Radcliffe-Brown argued that society can be viewed as a system of interacting strata, with each stratum having a function that contributes to the whole of society. These strata include organizations, behaviors, and cultures, and are shaped by rules, laws, and values.

According to Radcliffe-Brown, social structure can be explained by considering the functional role of each element within that system. The function of a social element is determined by its position in the system and its role within it. This function can be to meet the basic needs of society, resolve conflicts, or create stability within the system.

Radcliffe-Brown's structural functionalist theoretical perspective made significant contributions to sociology, including a scientific approach to explaining social phenomena and the importance of strata within society.

He focused on the communal and social functions of ritual, viewing festivals as a forum with cultural and educational significance for the entire participating community (or groups within the community). According to this perspective, rituals and ritual activities have the mission of consolidating and honoring the authority and position of leaders and managers, establishing and reinforcing social order, or conveying information about community conventions, thereby strengthening the internal solidarity of the festival community. Many authors affirm that village festivals in Vietnam are a form of community cultural activity where village solidarity and traditional village culture are strengthened and preserved. Distributed from North to South, many village festivals, in addition to their function of stabilizing and promoting harmonious order within the village, also have a historical education function.

According to Radcliffe-Brown's theory, the beliefs and doctrines of a community play a crucial role in maintaining its social structure. Therefore, in studying the Thanh Hoang belief system, applying this theory can help understand how the belief system contributes to maintaining and promoting social stability within that community. This would then allow for the study of worship practices, rituals, and beliefs related to Thanh Hoang to better understand their importance in maintaining and fostering solidarity and kinship within the community.

4.2 Concept and Origin of the Belief in Thanh Hoang Deities

Etymologically, “Thanh Hoang” can be understood as “Thanh” – city wall, and “Hoang” – deep moat surrounding the wall. The concept of “Thanh Hoang” refers to the deity who is the master of a citadel. Thành Hoàng means city moat; a moat with water is called “Trì” (pond, lake) and one without water is called “Hoang”. Building earth into “Thanh” and digging moats to make “Hoang” (Hinh, 1994, pp.23). “Thanh Hoang” is also a fairly common concept in China.

The tutelary deity can be understood as a sacred symbol representing community patronage. Depending on the locality, this deity can be personified into different historical or legendary figures. There are also cases where the identity of the tutelary deity is not clearly defined, but is simply referred to as the village's tutelary deity or the tutelary deity of the Local Area. For example, the Tan An communal house in Binh Duong province worships the Tutelary Deity specifically as Duke Nguyen Van Thanh, while the Tan Lan communal house in Dong Nai province worships the Tutelary Deity specifically as Tran Thuong Xuyen. However, communal houses like Phu Long and Phu Cuong in Binh Duong province do not have a clearly identified tutelary deity.

In 823, after completing the construction of Dai La Citadel (*Citadel of the Great Dike*) – the headquarters of the Tang dynasty's Protectorate General to Annan – Li Yuan Jia (Lý Nguyên Gia) conferred the title of Tutelary Deity of Dai La Citadel upon Su Li (Tô Lịch), an upright mandarin from the Song dynasty era. Later, in 866, when Gao Pian (Cao Biền) expanded the citadel, he further granted Tô Lịch the title “*Đô Phủ Thành Hoàng Thần Quân*” (Supreme Tutelary Deity of the Protectorate) (Hinh, 1994, pp. 31). Since then, the worship of Thanh Hoang began to emerge in Vietnam and continued to flourish under the country's later independent dynasties.

However, before the Thanh Hoang appeared as a protective deity in the Vietnamese pantheon, the Vietnamese had already established their own community deity – the village deity.

In primitive societies, humans have always believed that all things around them have souls. But those souls have the ability to know everything humans do, so they can help, protect, and even punish or bring misfortune to human lives. Humans could attribute all the good and bad in their lives and all the strange phenomena of nature to invisible forces. They lived in close communication with the living and powerful spirits of their deceased ancestors, with water sprites and forest spirits, plain spirits and mountain spirits. All the natural phenomena of the world around them originated from the intervention of different ghostly entities (Tylor, 2001, pp. 764). From that belief, humans began to look up to the spirit world with the aspiration of having a good life for the present and the future.

The Vietnamese people's belief in deities also originates from deep-seated beliefs in the folk consciousness and is richly expressed in various forms. These beliefs range from totemism (with images of birds, deer, dragons, fish) to fertility beliefs, along with the worship of nature deities. In addition, there is the custom of ancestor worship, starting from the common ancestors of the entire nation such as the Hung Kings, down

to the ancestors of smaller units such as villages, lineages, and families (Them, 1996, pp. 151-167).

The ancient Vietnamese belief in guardian spirits had its own life within the polytheistic belief system. Guardian spirits are supernatural forces with the power to protect villagers from malevolent forces. Guardian spirits do not have a specific name but can only manifest as a form of village spirit, as called by the mountain people (Them, 1996, pp. 165), similar to the Phi (ghost) worship in Lao and Thai culture; Changsung in Korean culture; and Kami in Japanese culture.

Thus, it can be seen that before the period of Chinese domination, the Vietnamese people had a very rich spiritual life, reflecting the thinking and aspirations of primitive people. These beliefs arose from the intrinsic needs of life. Therefore, when the belief in the Thanh Hoang of China was introduced to Vietnam, in order to survive, it had to adjust and transform itself to suit the local folk beliefs. Often, changes in form and content, whether minor or significant, led to clear differences compared to this belief in China. In other words, although the guardian spirit of the Vietnamese people acquired the title - Thanh Hoang deities - and was also "State canonization of folk beliefs", the endogenous factor always played a leading role in the development of the Thanh Hoang belief in Vietnam - the patron saint of the village community. The Vietnamese Thanh Hoang is the village spirit, the village ancestor, not a guardian spirit of citadels, bearing the spiritual leadership characteristics of feudal kings and mandarins, hidden within city walls surrounded by moats (Hinh, 1994, pp. 98).

The understanding of the term Thanh Hoang from its origin (to refer generally) to the current popular understanding of Vietnamese people is different.

As Hinh (1994) explains: "Duong Canh Thanh Hoang, Ban Canh Thanh Hoang, Ban Tho Thanh Hoang" (Tutelary Deity of the Local Community, Local Tutelary Deity, Territorial Patron Deity) are concepts referring to a local deity, an indigenous god, not one dispatched by the king (Hinh, 1994, pp. 61).

The term "Bon Canh Thanh Hoang" can be explained as follows: "Thanh Hoang" is the deity overseeing an area. "Bon Canh" is the land where one worships. The imperial decree "Bon Canh Thanh Hoang" for a deity is a new style; in Southern Vietnam, it was distributed almost simultaneously by the 5th year of Tu Duc reign (1852) (Nam, 2004, pg. 65). Therefore, "Thanh Hoang" is understood as the deity correctly named "Bon Canh Thanh Hoang", the deity of this area (Nam, 2004, pg. 238).

The name Thanh Hoang in documents is sometimes used with the phrases "Duong Canh Thanh Hoang; Ban (Bon) Canh Thanh Hoang and Thanh Hoang" are terms used in the king's imperial decrees for Thành Hoàng to refer to the deity perceived by the people as overseeing the area. In folk usage, there are also names like "Ban Tho Thanh Hoang; Ban Don Thanh Hoang; Ban Vien Thanh Hoang", etc. Such naming, upon examination, does not represent different types or ranks of Thanh Hoang but rather folk language reported to the court by local dignitaries (Hinh, 1994, pp 70).

From very early times, Vietnam did not have citadels but did have villages, and each village image was associated with a banyan tree, a ferry landing, a communal

courtyard (sân đình), and a communal house that worshipped the Thanh Hoang deity, the guardian spirit of the villagers. People built temples to express gratitude (to those who had merit with the people and the country - benevolent spirits) or out of fear (those who died at a sacred hour and thus caused epidemics, fires...). This is a distinctive feature of the Vietnamese Thanh Hoang: Thanh Hoang - Village (Tutelary God of Vietnamese Villages)

Thus, it can be seen that the Thanh Hoang belief in Vietnam has a separate existence, very different from that in China. The Thanh Hoang in Vietnam is the deity who governs, protects, and determines fortune and misfortune for the villagers, not “the god who rules in the city” (Hinh, 1994, pp. 251). The Thanh Hoang belief is the faith and admiration of a community of people for the deity they believe has the ability to protect and shelter that community within an administrative boundary.

4.3 Overview of the Tan Lan Communal House (Dong Nai province)

The Tan Lan Communal House, also known as Tan Lan City Temple, was formerly located in Tan Lan village, Phuoc Chanh district, Tran Bien Garrison. Today, it is situated in Hoa Binh ward, Bien Hoa city, Dong Nai province, facing the Dong Nai River on Nguyen Van Tri street.

When it was built, the villagers named the communal house after their village, Tan Lan (New Hamlet). Despite historical upheavals and numerous changes in local place names, the name of the *đình* has persisted to this day.

Legend has it that the Tan Lan Communal House originated as a small temple in Thanh Ken, built by the villagers during the reign of King Minh Mang (1820-1840). It was erected to honor General Tran Thuong Xuyen, the Tran Bien Governor-General, who made significant contributions to the reclamation of land and the development of trade in the Dong Nai - Gia Dinh region.

Recognizing its historical, cultural, and architectural-artistic value, the Tan Lan Communal House was designated a national-level historical and architectural-artistic relic by the Ministry of Culture - Information - Sports and Tourism according to Decision No. 457/QĐ, dated March 25, 1991.

4.4 Overview of the Tan An Communal House (Binh Duong province)

The Tan An Communal House was built in 1820 by the people of four communes: Tuong Binh (Tuong Binh Hiep), Tuong An (Tan An), Tuong Hoa (Dinh Hoa), and Cau Dinh. Initially, it was just a simple thatched house called Tuong An temple, worshipping the local Thanh Hoang deity. About 30 years later, the communal house was rebuilt on a larger scale and took its current form. The Tan An Communal House was recognized as a national-level architectural and artistic relic according to Decision No. 1261/QĐ-BVHTTDL dated April 26, 2014. The communal house worships Duke Nguyen Van Thanh (1757 - 1817), a military mandarin of the Nguyen Dynasty. In 1802, he was assigned to be the Governor-General of the Northern Citadel (Thang Long citadel). He ordered the repair of the Temple of Literature - Imperial Academy, and built the Khue

Van Cac pavilion. He had merits in helping the king compile the Hoang Viet law code (also known as the Gia Long Code). His contributions to the Nguyễn Dynasty were very significant. On the 21st day of the 1st month of the 21st year of the Tu Duc reign (1869), King Tu Duc issued an imperial decree for the Tan An Communal House, recognizing the communal house and bestowing a title upon the Thanh Hoang deity for the people to know and worship. According to the king's decree, the main deity worshipped in the communal house is the local Thanh Hoang.

4.5 Applying the Theory to the Research

When researching power relations based on social structure in the practice of Thanh Hoang belief rituals, I applied theories from the functionalist school, including: psychological functionalism (according to Malinowski's viewpoint) and structural-functionalism (according to the viewpoints of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown). In particular, Malinowski's psychological functionalism theory was used to explain the forms of belief associated with the community's livelihood, as well as the perception of the origins of illness and health, especially the desires of the people (Department of Anthropology, 2013, pp. 42)

With Radcliffe-Brown, functional theory was further emphasized in the connection between function and the general structure of the whole. This was called structural-functional theory. It examines the operation and reproduction of the traditional structures of societies and cultures, in order to create a theoretical model of the object being studied (Department of Anthropology, 2013, pp. 44). For him, structure is the totality of relatively stable internal relationships of individuals and elements, while function is inherent to all things and phenomena. He argued that the interdependence between functions brings not only unity but also balance and order to the whole.

According to Parsons, the task of Sociology is to find what is predetermined for what within the social system, meaning to outline the role of this or that element of the structure in the arrangement, preservation, and operation of the system (Capitonov, 2000, pp. 159). Parsons applied structural-functional theory to the study of culture in modern industrial-urban society. To maintain stability in the operation and development of society as a system, Parsons noted the need to preserve the equilibrium of a series of functional subsystems (such as family, education, economy...) within the total interactions between them. For Parsons, balance and stability are always more important than change in every social system; therefore, social order and control are not only central issues but, perhaps, the only issues in sociological analyses (Various Authors, 2005, pp. 38).

4.5.1 Applying Structural-functional Theory to Analyze the Psychological Needs of People in the Thanh Hoang Worship Belief System in the Southeast Region of Vietnam

Malinowski's functional theory also posits that any cultural practice or institution serves as a tool to satisfy the universal basic biological and psychological needs of individuals

in society (Phuong, Cam, et al. , 2013, pp.25). The Thanh Hoang belief fully meets the needs for a prosperous life (harvest rituals, organization of production cycles), and the need for peace and prosperity (protection from the spiritual world).

Malinowski believed that the goal of religious rituals is to meet individual needs. In the Thanh Hoang belief, the deity is considered a protector of the village, helping to maintain order and protect the villagers from threats from nature (such as storms, floods, droughts) and from social factors (such as war, epidemics). For example, during Thanh Hoang worship festivals, people often pray to the spirits to help ward off evil spirits and diseases, and to bring about abundant harvests. In the villages of the Southeast region, the Thanh Hoang worship ceremony often takes place on special occasions, such as the spring festival or the harvest festival, to pray for favorable weather, good health, and community protection from natural disasters. Through research at two communal houses, Tan Lan communal house and Tan An communal house, the author observed that most of those who seek out Thanh Hoang belong to certain segments of the population. They are often people in professions with a lot of luck but also risks, such as those working on the river, business people, and traders. In the past as well as now, people in risky and dangerous occupations have always tended to seek out and pray to Thanh Hoang more often than those in stable professions such as civil servants or employees...

Besides, among those who seek out Thanh Hoang, people of weaker health or those who are often sick are also more numerous than normally healthy individuals. In particular, people in difficult situations, facing death or important, urgent matters, also often turn to Thanh Hoang as a last hope.

There is no guarantee that everyone who comes to pray will get what they wish for. But for them, after many other ineffective methods, seeking the help of the Thanh Hoang deity is a last hope, a salvation, a spiritual motivation that gives them faith and strength to continue striving in life. This shows that, no matter the era, even without verifiable evidence of the gods' response, beyond hearsay, people are still willing to seek out and pray to the gods. Regardless of their perception, humans always need such a sacred entity, at the very least, someone to listen to them, a support system where they can place their faith and ask for help in difficult times. Through the practice of rituals such as the Rite of Inviting the Royal Decree, the Rite of Inviting the Spirit, etc., Vietnamese people here have a spiritual belief that Thanh Hoang will be the protective deity who bestows blessings upon the village. Additionally, performing the rituals can help an individual reduce feelings of anxiety, fear, or stress caused by facing issues such as death, risks in life, illness, or suffering, and can also give the individual faith in protection and shelter for their life, bringing better luck in work and life. Participating in these rituals allows individuals to release psychological pressure and achieve a state of inner balance. Therefore, in this approach, ritual serves the needs of each individual more than society as a whole.

Malinowski also pointed out that belief systems help people resolve psychological and social issues that they cannot solve through reason alone. Therefore, the reverence and worship of Thanh Hoang is an indispensable need arising from human psychology.

People worship Thanh Hoang to serve their real life, as a place where the spirit is sheltered and relied upon, where blessings are bestowed, and as a source of encouragement and motivation for people to be enthusiastic in their work and production, even a source of comfort when people face setbacks.

But it is not only in such urgent situations that people need the help of the Thanh Hoang deities; this perhaps stems from the age-old Vietnamese belief of 'if you worship, it will be sacred; if you are cautious, it will be well.' This faith and worship, even if not to the point of adoration, can also be seen as a form of conduct, a moral principle towards the deities to show respect. Moreover, on important occasions for the village or hamlet, local people also do not forget to inform and thank the Thanh Hoang as an unwritten rule, hoping that the Thanh Hoang will always protect and support all good things. This combination means that the deities are seen by the people as the guardian spirits of the community, with the aspiration for protection and support so that the community will always be peaceful, prosperous, and healthy. Thus, the practice of Peace Offering Festivals, besides being a traditional custom of the community, is also a ritual that reinforces faith, creates a positive mentality and effort in life for each individual and the community as a whole, through the belief in the Thanh Hoang deity. Applying functional theory to the study of the Thanh Hoang belief in the context of contemporary Vietnamese society will provide a correct and objective view when understanding the spiritual concepts and the functions of satisfying the needs and aspirations of the ancestors, while also partly explaining the transformations and changes of the belief compared to the past. At the same time, it helps to clarify why the Thanh Hoang belief in Vietnam still exists and develops in the modern social context, despite many major economic, political, and cultural changes.

4.5.2 The Role of the Thanh Hoang Belief in Community Cohesion

Radcliffe-Brown emphasized the connection between function and the overall structure, forming the structural-functional theory. This viewpoint focuses on the operation and reproduction of traditional structures in society and culture, thereby building a theoretical model for the research subjects (Malinowski, 1960, pp.44). According to him, structure is the totality of internal, relatively stable relationships between individuals and elements, while function is an inherent attribute of all phenomena and things. Radcliffe-Brown argued that functions have interdependent relationships, bringing unity, balance, and order to the whole.

In the process of researching the Thanh Hoang belief in the Southeast region, the application of theories from the functionalist school aims to emphasize the relationship between individuals, society, and their interdependent interactions. According to functionalism, the focus is placed on the individual and their needs, with the role of social institutions being to satisfy those needs, rather than serving the interests of the whole society or group. This perspective argues that social institutions exist to meet the basic goals of humans. Society is envisioned as a systematic and cohesive structure of relationships, operating similarly to a living organism, in which the parts (i.e., social

institutions) coordinate closely and almost automatically to maintain a general state of equilibrium.

In the study of rituals and the Peace Offering Festival during Thanh Hoang worship occasions, functionalist theory plays an important role in analysis and explanation. According to Radcliffe-Brown's viewpoint, the primary purpose of religious rituals is to maintain social order by emphasizing and reinforcing core values. These rituals bind members of society together, thereby promoting group cohesion and meeting the needs of society. If a specific ritual is not performed, dissatisfaction or negative reactions from community members may arise.

Radcliffe-Brown posited that each entity within society has a distinct function that helps maintain social order. The Thanh Hoang belief system functions to reinforce the social structure of the village community. Thanh Hoang is not only a spiritual symbol but also a crucial element in defining power relations and the division of responsibilities within the community. The rituals of worshipping Thanh Hoang help affirm the authority of the village dignitaries while promoting cooperation among community members. This is because the practice of rituals in the ceremonial and festival parts is often organized with the participation of village dignitaries, such as the village head, elders, and families with important roles in the community. These festivals are not only occasions to show respect for the deities but also opportunities to strengthen social relationships and maintain order within the community. Before the festival takes place, village officials meet to establish groups such as the Ritual Committee, Logistics Committee, Ceremonial Music Ensemble, etc., to be responsible for and undertake the common tasks of and ensure coordination between the groups in the village, with the participation of the entire community, including families and various social groups. Participating in the rituals together helps reduce differentiation and encourages cooperation.

In the context of the Thanh Hoang belief system, participation in worship rituals helps people to be more united and engaged in the common affairs of the village, combined with festivals and community exchange activities, creating opportunities for people to relieve social stress and build solidarity. Additionally, some folk games during the festivals also function to soothe anxiety and resolve potential conflicts within the community, thereby reducing social conflicts and enhancing stability.

Applying structural-functional theory to the study of culture in modern industrial-urban society aims to explain the forms of belief related to the livelihood of ethnic groups, the perception of the operation and reproduction of traditional structures of societies, and the maintenance of stability in the operation and development of society as a system, to emphasize the individual, society, and their interdependence. From this, it can be seen that the functionalist school plays an important role in the analysis and interpretation of Thanh Hoang worship rituals in the context of contemporary society. Specifically, according to Radcliffe-Brown's viewpoint, the purpose of religious rituals is to maintain social order by emphasizing certain values. Typically, the Peace Offering Festival brings members of society together; therefore, it functions to serve common values and promote

community cohesion. The application of functional theory will open up the clearest perspective on the characteristics of the Thanh Hoang belief in the Southeast region in the context of contemporary Vietnamese society.

From the perspectives of Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski on religious rituals, when compared to the Thanh Hoang belief in the Southeast region, there are many similarities and adaptations. Through the Peace Offering Festival, several typical values are emphasized to maintain the social order of the people here; the Peace Offering Festival is an occasion to gather the community and foster community cohesion in terms of livelihood; and to satisfy the spiritual needs of individuals.

When considering the rituals of practicing the belief, especially examining the Peace Offering Festival, it can be seen that each ceremony has its own function, and they all collectively serve a major festival occasion.

5. Recommendations

From the study of the Thanh Hoang belief system (tutelary deity) in some villages of the Southeast region, as presented above, it is evident that the worship of Thanh Hoang plays a significant role in preserving and promoting traditional cultural values in the current movement of building new rural areas.

First, the worship of Thanh Hoang expresses a conscious awareness of honoring origins and maintaining national unity.

Second, the worship of Thanh Hoang has contributed to creating a stronghold to protect the country, preventing the infiltration of foreign cultures and the urbanization of rural areas in the Southern region.

Third, the Thanh Hoang is an attractive cultural activity and a “village festival” that reflects fairness, democracy, and openness in community life.

Therefore, the author proposes some recommendations as follows:

First, to preserve and promote the cultural significance of the Thanh Hoang worship as well as the Ky Yen festival of this belief system, localities need to restore and maintain the communal houses.

Second, organize activities during the communal house and temple worship days combined with tourism activities to promote awareness among local residents and neighboring provinces, encouraging them to attend and better understand the region’s beliefs and culture.

6. Conclusion

The worship of Thanh Hoang in the Southeast region, when surveyed and analyzed through the lens of functional theory, emerges not only as a distinctive form of folk religion but also as a cultural-social institution deeply reflecting the spiritual life, psychology, and community organizational structure of the Vietnamese people. By applying the perspectives of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, this writing has clarified

the key functions of this belief system, from meeting the spiritual needs of the individual to the role of community cohesion and the maintenance of social order.

At the individual level, the Thanh Hoang belief brings psychological comfort, helping people overcome feelings of insecurity and fear in the face of life's changes, especially in the context of precarious livelihoods, natural disasters, and epidemics. This is a specific manifestation of the psychological function that Malinowski emphasized in his studies of religious rituals and the biological-spiritual needs of humans. With this function, Thanh Hoang becomes a spiritual anchor for the vulnerable, those in dire circumstances, and more broadly, a symbol of the community's faith and hope.

At the community level, the rituals associated with the Thanh Hoang belief – especially the Peace Offering Festival – are not only religious in nature but also serve as tools for maintaining social order and reproducing traditional social structures. According to Radcliffe-Brown's perspective, beliefs and rituals are means of strengthening the network of social relationships, assigning roles and responsibilities, and promoting solidarity and consensus within the community. It is thanks to these rituals that village institutions are maintained, social relationships are reinforced, and local cultural values continue to be passed down through many generations.

In the context of rapid modernization and urbanization in the Southeast region, the Thanh Hoang belief system still maintains an important role, demonstrating its enduring vitality and flexible adaptability. Approaching this religious phenomenon with functional theory has provided an effective method to explain why seemingly outdated elements still exist and thrive in contemporary life.

From this, it can be affirmed that studying the Thanh Hoang belief is not only about understanding a folk cultural phenomenon but also a way to identify the foundational structures of Vietnamese social life, while also contributing to the development of strategies for preserving and promoting the national cultural identity in the new era.

The application of functional theory in the study of the Thanh Hoang belief shows that this is not just a folk religious phenomenon but a social institution with profound sociological functions. This approach not only helps to clarify the nature of folk beliefs but also opens up an interdisciplinary scientific approach, contributing to the preservation and promotion of traditional cultural values in the current context of modernization and globalization.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Author Nguyen Thi Thu Hang is a lecturer and also a doctoral candidate at Hong Bang International University. She is currently a full-time lecturer in the Vietnamese Studies department, teaching subjects such as Vietnamese for Foreigners and Fundamentals of Vietnamese Culture. Her research interests focus on tourism, beliefs, and Vietnamese

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