



Amulets and the Marketplace

Paper amulets and the blocks used to print them are found in many museum collections, including those of the American Museum of Natural History and the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology; however, museums often lack detailed knowledge of their manufacture and use. With the exception of a few historical studies, most information simply describes the designs. The author, drawing on long relationships with several ritual masters within and outside Hanoi, was able to gain esoteric knowledge of amulet production and empowerment and to talk with a variety of amulet consumers about their motivations for using them. The production of the woodblock mingles magic and technology in anticipation of the further magic that animates the amulet struck from the block. As the demand for amulets swells, cheap, stenciled amulets are widely used and ritual masters are less scrupulous about personal prohibitions and purifications before empowering these mass-manufactured amulets. Ritual masters describe these changes in terms compatible with Benjamin's notion of "auras" and the relative power of amulets.

KEYWORDS: Vietnam—amulet—popular religion—sacred object—material culture

WHEN I graduated from university in 1995, it was very difficult to find a job in Hanoi. When I returned home for Tết, the lunar New Year, my friends advised me to see the ritual master Nguyễn Văn Lan to request a lucky amulet. Mr. Lan produced many different amulets, including amulets for chasing away evil spirits, protecting the house, curing sick people, or bringing luck, love, and reputation. I made an offering of fifty thousand VND at Mr. Lan's family temple altar and asked him for an amulet that would help me secure a job in Hanoi. I strictly followed Mr. Lan's instructions, putting the amulet on my family altar at midnight and asking the ancestors to assist me with my prospective employers. I gave the ancestors the names of the hiring officers, and one month later my application was accepted by three different organizations in the capital.

In 1996, I went back to Mr. Lan to ask for an amulet that I could carry with me for protection and to avoid bad luck. I carried the amulet for almost one year and luck came to me. Then, on the night of the thirtieth day of the tenth lunar month, when I was on a research trip to Bắc Ninh province, my wallet, with the amulet inside, fell out of my pocket and both were lost. Mr. Lan had told me to never carry the amulet in my back pocket where I would sit on it, but out of force of habit, I had placed my wallet in my back pocket. The next morning, Mr. Lan called me and asked me why I had dropped my amulet. I was surprised and filled with admiration for his magical power. As soon as I returned home, I went to his house bearing offerings for a ritual of apology, and asked him for a new amulet. Every New Year, from 1996 to 2004, I have asked him for an amulet, ordering a different type of amulet each year, one year an amulet for good health, the next an amulet for buying land. My aim was to get twelve amulets, one for each year in the twelve-year horoscope cycle, to see what sort of effect the amulets would have on my fortune. Since my first encounter with Mr. Nguyễn Văn Lan I have used many different amulets, from Mr. Lan and others, as a way of testing the amulets' efficacy.

In all sincerity, amulets have brought me more joy than bitterness. Western anthropologists sometimes say that a personal reason, experience, or inclination lies behind every choice of a fieldwork project; sometimes the catalyst is acknowledged and other times it is unconscious. My own experiences with amulets have inspired me to use my training as an ethnologist and conduct intensive research on amulets of the Kinh (Việt) people.

RITUAL MASTERS AND THEIR WORK

This study is based on my observations and interviews with both ritual masters (*thầy cúng*) who make amulets (*bùa trấn trạch*) and the people who request the amulets. The term “ritual master” requires explanation. Different practitioners of popular religion may enjoy the spirits’ special favor and thus be empowered to divine, offer efficacious prayers, and make amulets. Those who are so favored are considered to be both knowledgeable in the ways of popular religion and careful in their own practice. Ritual masters may be found among Bud-

dhist monks, sorcerers (*phù thủy*) who have inherited the knowledge of amulet-making from their fathers and grandfathers, old men in the countryside who know Chinese characters and have studied old ritual and divination texts (*ông thông*), and spirit mediums (*ông đồng bà đồng*) who have been destined to serve the Mother Goddesses of the Religion of the Four Palaces (see KENDALL, VŨ, and NGUYỄN in this issue). These different types of popular religious specialists are not mutually exclusive. For example, ritual master Trần Minh Thủy,¹ Cốc township, Bắc Giang province, is a spirit medium who, through the favor of the Gods, is empowered to divine, offer efficacious prayers, and make amulets as a sorcerer or *phù thủy*.

Initiated sorcerers² who empower paper amulets and the wood-blocks used for printing amulets are not only aided by their relationship to various deities of the Daoist pantheon; through careful training, they also command “spirit soldiers” who help them in this work. These spirit soldiers are souls from the underworld, wandering ghosts who died before their time and without descendants to care for them. Ritual masters are believed to use their magic



FIGURE I. The house protection amulet at VME. Vũ Hồng Thuật, VME archive.



FIGURE 2. The first line of words are *Phật*, *Pháp*, and *Tăng* meaning the three treasures of Buddhism (Buddha statue, sutra, and monk). Vũ Hồng Thuật, VME archive.

to capture these souls and train the spirit soldiers to assist in the work of magic. People say that monks who make amulets keep spirit armies hidden away in a secret room of their temples.

The ritual masters I surveyed in Bắc Giang and Bắc Ninh provinces also participate in some form of secular employment. Some ritual masters work both for the spirits and for society; for example, ritual master Vũ Văn Quyèn is a commune cadre in Thuận Thành district, Bắc Ninh province, and ritual master Nguyễn Văn An is a party secretary of a ward in Bắc Ninh township. Well-known ritual masters such as Trần Minh Thủy in Bắc Giang and Nguyễn Văn Lan in Thanh Hóa make an average of between three and five million VND a month. Ritual masters claim that they do not use the money they make through spiritual activity for personal financial gain; rather, they spend it on improving their temples and buying offerings. In addition to building or renovating their temples, successful ritual masters build new houses, buy motorbikes, cars, televisions, and refrigerators, pay for their children's education, and deal in real estate. Some ritual masters spend millions or even billions of Vietnamese dong on building temples, saying that they are obligated to redistribute the favor that they receive from the Buddhas and gods. If ritual masters do not share what they have gained, the spirits will punish them by making them ill or driving them mad. The extent and elaborateness of temple construction and refurbishment in northern Vietnam today testifies to the many ritual masters, including amulet makers, who are sincere in their beliefs. My observations suggest that because of the intensity of their devotion, family members and the authorities do not try to prevent the ritual masters' work.

Ritual masters commonly say that the use of amulets emerged in response to a period of social instability in the distant past. Amulet production flourishes today as Vietnamese cope with the risks of the market economy, new health risks as a consequence of pesticides and new diseases, natural disasters prompted by envi-

ronmental exploitation, and a rising number of traffic accidents. At the same time, the State's policy permitting freedom of religious practices has enabled the revival and proliferation of amulets to cope with these new dangers and uncertainties. Interviewing amulet users, I soon realized that I could not characterize them by gender, age, locality, economic situation, or motivation. Ritual master Trần Minh Thủy's clients include farmers, civil servants, traders, and students. At least one person per day comes to seek help from the spirits via an amulet because something unusual has happened in his or her home: someone is ill, pigs or chickens have died, or business is bad. Additionally, civil servants seek assistance in asking for promotions. School students wish to study well, pass the entrance exam into university, and have a job after graduation. The ritual master prepares an amulet and installs it with a ritual appropriate to each client's needs.³ For example, when Mrs. Thúy from Từ Sơn township (Bắc Ninh) province finished her new house, she invited ritual master Trần Minh Thủy to post amulets and make a ritual called *địa hoàn long mạch* (to return the land to its original situation before construction); digging the house's foundation breaks the land's veins and offerings must be presented to the House Site God (*Thổ địa*) in apology. In addition to conventional offerings such as sticky rice, chicken, fruits, votive papers, and a special powder (*hàn the*) mixed with sacred water from three sources (river junction, well, and rainwater), the ritual master uses needles and bundles of five-color thread to make a barrier that prevents malevolent spirits from entering the house.

During my fieldwork, I often heard ritual masters describe amulets as "a double-edged sword." They cited numerous instances where ritual masters and clients had been punished by the gods for mistaken or careless magic. For example, ritual master Nguyễn Văn An in Bắc Giang ceased to be a ritual master when he went mad,

FIGURE 3. The compound ideograph *sắc lệnh* ("order") with a red seal to show that the Jade Emperor has issued his order to expel evil spirits, kill demons, and protect the client's family. Vũ Hồng Thuật, VME archive.



his family was ruined, and his domestic animals died. After Mrs. Vinh in Thuận Thành district, Bắc Ninh province, built her house on the pagoda's land, her business was bad, she was unlucky, and she was always sick. On 27 October 2004, she came to meet ritual master Nguyễn Văn Bình in Bắc Ninh and asked for an amulet to post in her home to repel evil spirits and bring in good luck. Before she left, the ritual master gave her instructions on preparing offerings (fruits, votive papers, sticky rice, chicken) and told her to hold the ritual on the fifteenth day of the lunar month. Mrs. Vinh made the ritual on the fourteenth day without the sticky rice and chicken, which would have been prepared as ancestral offerings on the fifteenth day of a lunar month. The gods residing in the amulet punished her by making her ill, while her family's circumstances continued to plummet. Her husband came to ritual master Bình and asked for another amulet. He also invited the ritual master to his home to conduct the ritual. In one week, Mrs. Vinh's health had improved. Stories like these could be replicated many times over as testimony to the power of amulets. But what do the amulets contain? In what sense are they efficacious?

THE HOUSE-PROTECTING AMULET

My window into this world is a house-protecting amulet and the wood-block that was used to print it that I collected for the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME 51.02.05.32-1-2). This type of amulet prevents malevolent ghosts and demons from entering the home, protecting both people and animals. People are most likely to commission house-protecting amulets at the beginning or end of the year and position them on the wall above the ancestral altar. On 27 June 2002,



FIGURE 4. Under the word *sắc lệnh* is the word *ni* with a round of Sanskrit words *um ma ni bát minh hūm*. These invocations for Quan Yin come from the Mật tông (secret sect) of Buddhism in Vietnam. Vũ Hồng Thuật, VME archive.



FIGURE 5. The Eight Trigrams are surrounded by Chinese ideographs and four *tróc phọc* or stylized representations of “seal.” Vũ Hồng Thuật, VME archive.

I bought the amulet and woodblock from Mr. Vũ Văn Mạnh, a twenty-two-year-old woodcarver (in 2002) from Lạc Thổ commune, Thuận Thành district, Bắc Ninh province. I knew that Mr. Mạnh had bought the woodblock from Mr. Nguyễn Đăng Chuyên in nearby Song Hồ commune not long before I purchased it for the VME. Mr. Chuyên had inherited it from his grandfather, Nguyễn Đăng Thời, a ritual master and producer of votive paper who died in 2000. Mr. Thời had practiced as a ritual master from 1930 to 1958 but gave it up when the State prohibited the invocation of spirits and the burning of votive paper and incense as “superstitious” activities. In 1986, when ritual practices were once again tolerated, Mr. Thời resumed printing house-protecting amulets for clients from near and far who pasted them on their family altars. According to Mr. Thời’s widow, Mr. Thời had gone to Bồ Đà Pagoda in Việt Yên district, Bắc Giang province, around 1930, to ask permission from the Mother Goddess to carve a woodblock for amulets. By the time Mr. Mạnh inherited the woodblock, it had been used for many years and the carving was no longer clear. Mr. Nguyễn Đăng Chuyên brought the woodblock to Mr. Mạnh and asked him to make a new copy of the old woodblock. When Mr. Mạnh finished the carving, he asked Mr. Chuyên to sell him the old one to use as a model because it was beautifully carved and the amulet content was more complete than others he had used. Mr. Chuyên refused to sell the woodblock to Mr. Mạnh. He said, “No one has ever yet sold objects of the Buddha and the Goddesses. If they are no longer used, they are burned or put in the river to cool down.”

In May 2000, when I began to research and collect amulets for the VME, I went to Mr. Vũ Văn Mạnh’s workshop in Bắc Ninh to learn about materials, tools, and techniques for carving amulet woodblocks. After hearing me explain the purpose



FIGURE 6. Under the tiger are three Chinese ideographs. The word in the middle means *trần* (“keep”—keep the house safe). The combined ideographs on the left and right are read *sát quỷ* (“kill demon”). Vũ Hồng Thuật, VME archive.

of my work, Mr. Mạnh walked me to Mr. Chuyễn’s house to see the old woodblock, thinking that I would be able to buy it for the Museum. While Mr. Chuyễn was willing to talk to me and had many interesting and helpful things to say, he resisted selling the old woodblock or describing the ceremony that made it efficacious. He said, “My family is a family of ritual masters. It is our tradition, and we have never revealed its secrets to an outsider.” He went on to tell me, “In the past, we had many amulet woodblocks and manuals. Only a few remain because during the anti-superstition campaigns in 1957 and 1958, anyone who performed a ritual was criticized. We had no recourse but to burn our secret books so that they could be returned to the ancestors.” I listened attentively, noting the mournful look in his face. He continued: “Amulets are like a double-edged sword. If we do not use them carefully, they can cause us great harm.”

Mr. Mạnh eventually prevailed on Mr. Chuyễn to sell him the woodblock, promising that he would only use it as a model and would not print amulets from it because that would be a violation of the laws of sorcery. Shortly thereafter, having made his copy, Mr. Mạnh resold the old block to the Museum.⁴ The acquisition of the woodblock prompted me to ask: how was this magical piece of carved wood originally produced?

MAGICAL PRODUCTION

Printing amulets from woodblocks has a long history in Vietnam, dating back to the Trần dynasty (1227–1400), but the process of printing and animating amulets from woodblocks is presently at risk of disappearing. Today, even ritual masters living in remote villages use amulets that have been mass-produced using metal stencils. Only a few ritual masters and the monks in Hàm Long Pagoda in

Bắc Ninh province still print amulets from woodblocks and then imbue them with incantations. It takes three full days to paint a paper or cloth amulet in the most traditional way, but it takes only one hour to print amulets from a woodblock and recite incantations. When printers mass-produce amulets from a stencil, they run off a bundle in a matter of minutes. For the past ten years, ritual masters have been buying printed amulets from the market and simply reselling them to clients, performing their own incantations to animate and empower them. These pieces of stenciled paper are in marked contrast to woodblock printed amulets and the blocks used to print them, objects that have been produced through technologies of magic as well as art (cf. GELL 1988, MALINOWSKI 1954).

An impression from a woodblock, like the one Mr. Thời used, can become a model for another woodblock in a chain of transmission that begins with a painted amulet executed by a ritual master, which is then pasted on the original block as the carver's model. An inscription on Mr. Thời's woodblock identifies it with BỔ ĐÀ Pagoda in Tân Sơn commune, Việt Yên district, Bắc Giang province, where the original amulet was probably made.⁵ Only men can produce amulets, either as ritual masters who paint them on paper or cloth or as carvers who work from a pre-existing amulet. Amulets that are hand-painted by a sorcerer who has his own temple and commands a spirit army are the most powerful and consequently the most expensive (five- to seven hundred thousand VND in 2005). Ritual masters usually prepare themselves for painting amulets by going to pagodas or temples to venerate the Buddhas and goddesses on the first and the fifteenth days of the lunar months. Before painting an amulet, ritual master Trần Minh Thủy keeps a vegetarian diet, and avoids sleeping with his wife, going to weddings or funerals, and killing animals.

When a ritual master writes or draws directly on paper or cloth to make an amulet or a paper pattern for a woodblock, he starts with a compound ideograph for the word “command” (*sắc lệnh*). The topmost part of this highly stylized ideograph is a component known as *tam thanh bình* symbolizing the Three Pure Ones of the Daoist Pantheon (*Thái Thanh* or Great Pure, *Thượng Thanh* or Upper Pure, and *Ngọc Thanh* or Jade Pure). The bottom half of this compound is the ideograph “command” (*lệnh*). As he writes, the ritual master recites an incantation commanding these deities to descend and empower the amulet. The writing and the recitation must end at the same moment; if the writing is incomplete, the amulet will not be effective and the amulet maker must make another.

According to ritual master Huyền Phụng, “For any amulet maker, the incantation that accompanies the writing of the ideograph ‘command’ is the most important incantation of the animation process for any amulet.” Ritual master Huyền Phụng recites an incantation to summon deities of the three realms—heaven, earth, and water (*Thiên phủ lệnh*, *Địa phủ lệnh*, *Thủy phủ lệnh*, *Tam phủ công đồng vi lệnh*)—to descend to the amulet and contribute to its power. Different incantations accompany the writing of other components of an amulet depending on its use. In other words, amulets for good business, warding off demons, protecting

the house, or stemming a tide of repetitive funerals have their own distinctive components, but all of these amulets contain the configuration of “command” and the seal mark the ritual master affixes to the amulet in this same place; both of these elements are fundamental to its empowerment.

In preparing a house-protecting amulet, the ritual master next writes the ideograph *nĩ*⁶ under the word “command,” flourishing the brush with great style in thick ink so that evil spirits look at it and run away. When writing the word *nĩ*, a ritual master must concentrate, focusing his awareness on inviting the spirits to incarnate the amulet quickly to chase away evil spirits. Around the word *nĩ* he writes the Sanskrit phrase *úm ma ni bát minh hùm* (*Om Maṇi Padme Hūṃ*), which gathers power inside the circle of writing and signifies that all of the gods are present inside the circle; evil spirits should recoil in terror, “like a prostitute when she sees her father.” Outside this ring of Sanskrit words are four ideographic combinations for “thunder and fire” (*phoc loi hoã*) in the four corners, representing four directions: east, west, south, and north. To make the amulet more powerful, ritual masters draw a stylized circle around each “thunder and fire” combination, suggesting a noose to catch demons. When writing the word “thunder,” ritual master Huyền Phụng recites an incantation to invite the thunder spirit, earth spirit, and the spirits who govern each hour, day, month, and year. He calls Chinese generals, both historical and mythological (Mã Uất Luân, Quách Nguyên, Phương Trọng, Đãng Hồng, Điều Nguyên) to quickly descend into and empower the amulet. Next he recites an incantation while writing the word “fire,” which commands the descent into the amulet of the thunder spirit, fire spirit, and earth spirit. After writing and reciting incantations for thunder and fire, ritual master Huyền Phụng makes a magical mudra with his fingers, gesturing as he recites more incantations.

The next design is the Eight Trigrams (*tiên thiên bát quái*: heaven, earth, thunder, wind, water, fire, mountain, marsh) arranged in an octagon with yin and yang, the symbol of harmony and balance, at the center. The phrase *Úm ma ni bát minh hùm* makes a boundary between the trigrams and the center. A clockwise circle of the twenty-eight stars that govern fate make a border around this configuration. To make them more sacred and powerful, people draw additional elements on the upper parts of the ideographs (see illustration). On the VME woodblock, each added element represents one of the Eight Trigrams.⁷

Below the trigrams, a tiger image repels evil spirits.⁸ The incantation for the tiger spirit describes the tiger as the son of Đê Thích, the guardian of the dead, who transformed himself into a tiger to chase away evil spirits and to cure human beings. To increase the tiger’s power on the amulet, ritual masters add four encircled Chinese characters: “wood” by the tiger’s right ear, “fire” under his tail, “water” in front of his forepaws, and “metal” on his back. When the ritual master inscribes “thunder and fire” by the end of the tiger’s tail, he again crosses his fingers in a magical gesture and recites an incantation asking for harmony and balance.

Next, ritual master Huyền Phụng includes the words “*sát quy*” (killing demons) which prevents demons from entering the house. When writing the word “*sát*,”

the ritual master recites magic words of command, ordering the spirits from the sky and the earth, and the spirits governing each hour, day, month, and year to swallow potentially malevolent wandering ghosts, thereby reducing them to soil and sand. The ritual master gives this command in the name of the Buddhas and the gods for the sake of human salvation. Then he writes the word “demon” (*quỷ*) and reads an incantation ordering demons from the sky, the earth, the mountains, and the rivers to die, and commands gods from the five elements to kill them. Next to the word “kill demons” is the word *trấn* (keep). The incantation performed when writing this word orders malevolent ghosts from five directions to follow the Buddhas’ and the gods’ command to enter jail.⁹

Mr. Mạnh’s family, still carving in the old way, uses *thị* wood (decandrous persimmon), which is soft, resistant, and stable. They buy it from villages within and outside Bắc Ninh.¹⁰ Nowadays, *thị* wood is rare because families who used to grow persimmon trees have replaced them with trees that produce fruit several times a year and have a higher market yield. Carvers usually choose ten- to fifteen-year-old trees that cost around five hundred thousand VND per tree (approximately thirty-three USD). They buy their wood on an auspicious day compatible with their own horoscope, but never on the inauspicious fifth, fourteenth, or twenty-third days of the lunar month. They also burn incense to worship the ancestors and the gods, asking for support in their quest to buy good wood. Once the tree is cut down, the carver leaves it to season for from five- to ten months until no resin remains in the wood, then saws it into planks in the desired dimensions and thickness for a woodblock.

On the day they split the wood into a block, the carver’s household performs the *lễ phật mộc* or *lễ trăm mộc tinh* ritual to protect the members of the workshop during the cutting and carving.¹¹ The amulet carver carries out this ritual himself, setting out offerings in front of the tree and reciting the following formula:

Forest spirits! To make the amulet woodblocks, we earnestly invite the founding ancestor of woodblock carvers, Lương Như Hộc and the god Lỗ Ban (the ancestor of wood carvers) to assist us in cutting the wood.... Cut away all demons, dragons, and malevolent ghosts. (May the) carver have good luck. Quickly heed our request.

The carver taps the block rapidly three times before cutting it. Traditional belief holds that ghosts and malevolent spirits visit large old trees or are attracted by the remnants of food consumed by birds resting in the branches. The ritual chases malevolent entities out of the wood so that later the spirits of the amulet can safely animate the vacated block.

When the now split wood has been seasoned in the shade for three months and is ready to be worked, the carver prepares a small ritual, burning incense and making simple offerings to the ancestors of his family and the ancestral founders of his profession. Before carving, the craftsman smoothes the wood with a plane and then applies rice paste with a pine needle brush. Next he affixes a paper amulet, usually an impression from an existing woodblock, facing the board so that it will

show through in reverse. Carvers use a variety of chisel types and sizes to reproduce the amulet's design.

ACTIVATING AMULETS FOR USE

A ritual master brings the carved woodblock to his temple to activate it, performing a special ritual before using it for the first time. Any ritual master can empower a woodblock, but as with painted amulets, those activated by a sorcerer who commands a spirit army are considered the most powerful. On an auspicious day and hour, the ritual master sets out offerings, washes his hands and feet, seals his mouth with a red scarf, and dabs on perfume. He then holds an incense stick to draw ideographs in the air above the basin of water, ink, paper, and cloth. This is called “doing magic” (*làm phép*), evoking the Buddhas and the gods to descend into the amulet to empower it. Each of the ritual masters that I got to know during my research has his own way of doing magic based on the sect he follows and what he learned from his teacher or inherited from his father. For example, when doing magic, ritual master Trần Minh Thủy uses the fingers of his left hand to make magic gestures (*mudras*) while his other hand holds an incense stick to write Chinese ideographs and draw magic images over the amulet, all while he recites an incantation. Ritual masters add or omit rites to fit their client's economic situation and to adapt to the requirements of their clients. The amulet will be less effective if, when the spirits are invited to descend into it, they have cause to be offended because women or mourners are present, if cats climb the altar, or if incense is extinguished when it is only half burned. By contrast, it is a good sign if incense bursts into flame or if a yellow dog passes by the site.¹² The following deities were invoked into the Museum's woodblock: Kwan Yin Bodhisattva; Daoist Three Pure Ones—the Great Pure (*Thái Thanh*), the Upper Pure (*Thượng Thanh*), and the Jade Pure (*Ngọc Thanh*); the Jade Emperor (*Ngọc Hoàng*); the Southern Star (*Nam Tào*); the Northern Star (*Phạm Thiên, Đế Thích*); and the deities of the Religion of the Four Palaces (Mother of Water, Mother of Mountains and Forests, Mother of Heaven, Saint Trần Hưng Đạo, the Fifth Mandarin, the Sixth Dame, Sir Tiger, and Sir Snake). These deities have the power to catch demons and malevolent ghosts, as well as to cure people.

After printing or writing an amulet, or after purchasing and animating a mass-produced amulet, a ritual master activates it in the client's home (*hấp kim cương*) by invoking spirits from the sky, drawing ideographs in the air over the amulet with a stick of incense while reciting an incantation, and then affixing the mark of his seal to the amulet to convey the authority of the community of gods. The ritual master both animates (calls gods into) and activates the commercial mass-produced amulet. A painted amulet or an amulet made from a traditional woodblock has been animated in the process of its production; the gods are already present in the amulet and the ritual master need only activate them.



FIGURE 7. Ritual master Trần Minh Thủy, with appropriate votive paper offerings, performing the ritual to activate an amulet for a family in Bắc Ninh province, 2004. Vũ Hồng Thuật, VME archive.

THE PROPER WAY TO DEAL WITH AN EMPOWERED OBJECT

Paper amulets are powerful objects, but they are also frequently replaced and must be disposed of carefully. Families can do this themselves or they may invite a ritual master. According to the ritual masters, when the amulet has been pasted on the wall for one hundred days, the magical power created by the spirits dissolves into the air to chase away evil spirits. The paper amulet, hung at home, becomes only a sign of this power so that demons and evil spirits are afraid to approach the house. Because the original power of the object is diminished, people usually leave the amulet in place until it deteriorates. When it is no longer used, some people burn it and mix the ash with water to foster the growth of trees such as betel, areca, jack, coco, or banana. Others put the amulet into the river to cool it down as they would cool an incense pot that they have retired from an altar.

As reflected in my field notes from Bắc Ninh province, precise procedures for removing amulets vary between families, depending on household custom. On 10 November 2004, Mrs. Lê Thị Vui burned incense and reported to the ancestors and the house's spirits that she was replacing her family's house-protecting amulet before she took it down. Mrs Nguyễn Thị Vân, also in Bắc Ninh, placed offerings on the ancestral altar on the first day of the lunar month before taking down her amulet. However, Mrs. Đĩnh in Thuận Thành district had a more serious situation. She had asked a ritual master for a house-protecting amulet. The amulet maker died one year later, and after his death Mrs. Đĩnh's family's business suffered, her son went mad, and her poultry died. In this chaotic situation,

Mrs. Điềm came to ritual master Trần Minh Thủy in Bắc Giang for a divination. Mr. Thủy said that Mrs. Điềm was fated to become a spirit medium, but he also said that she must remove the amulet because the amulet maker had died. On the fifteenth day of the tenth lunar month of 2004, Mrs. Điềm invited Mr. Thủy to make a ritual at her home to replace the old amulet. To desacralize the old amulet, he wrote talismanic ideographs in the air with incense, recited incantations, formed a magical mudra with his fingers, then put a mixture of ginger juice and wine on the amulet and burned it. He pasted a new amulet in the place of the old one and activated it by making the appropriate mudras, reciting incantations, and evoking the Buddhas and the gods to incarnate the amulet, chase away evil spirits, and bring good fortune to the family.

The woodblocks used to print amulets require similar precautions. Once the printer has used the woodblock to print amulets, he cleans it and the deities return to their own realms. Although the block is imbued with the potential presence of deities, the ritual master must work magic to call them back into the block before each use. When he prints an amulet off of the woodblock, he empowers the resulting paper amulet by calling the deities into it, where they remain latent until the ritual master activates the amulet for use. To prepare for this work, ritual master Huyền Phụng in Bắc Ninh province brushes his teeth and takes a bath. He uses ginger juice mixed with wine to cleanse the woodblock, purifying it and removing the scent of meat offerings. He considers this an obligation for all amulet makers, although most other ritual masters omit this step. A ritual master then cleanses the woodblock with cool, boiled, five-spice water (star anise, cardamom, sandalwood, *trinh khương*, and white lime water), performing a ritual called *sắc ván* or *mộc dục*, which certifies that the woodblock amulet is ready for use. Now the ritual master “does magic” to call the gods and Buddhas back into the carved amulet on the face of the woodblock.

After cleansing the block to prepare it for use, ritual master Trần Minh Thủy puts a red cloth on the offering tray and places the woodblock on top of the cloth to present it to the family ancestors. Monk Thích Thanh Vinh from Bồ Đà Pagoda in Bắc Giang province, where the style of the VME woodblock originated, presents the woodblock on the altar honoring The Three Treasures (*Tam bảo*: the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha) or on the altar of the god Đức Chúa Ông. Ritual master Vũ Văn Quyền in Bắc Ninh displays the woodblock on the tiger altar in his home temple. Ritual masters make these presentations on different altars because their fate (horoscope) determines that they should venerate a certain god or spirit or because they are obligated to venerate the particular gods that have granted them the favor of making amulets. These obligations determine the way ritual masters organize their rituals, from cleansing the wood to setting up the altar. However, they all invoke the same list of Buddhas and gods into the woodblock.

Ritual masters also keep their religious tools very carefully between each use, showing their respect to the Buddhas and the gods who are animated in the woodblocks. After printing an amulet, ritual master Huyền Phụng wraps all of his

tools, including woodblocks, brushes, ink, and seals, in red paper and sets them in a high place to prevent dogs and cats from jumping over them. The monk Thích Thanh Vinh from Bồ Đà Pagoda in Bắc Giang province has closed shelves to protect woodblocks and religious books from termites, dust, rats, and the touch of curious outsiders. The monk said, “Before the amulet woodblock is sacralized, it is just a piece of wood, but after being ritually empowered, Buddhas and gods operate through it. Thus, we have to keep amulet woodblocks in sacred, closed, and clean places.” In this pagoda, woodblocks are kept in a separate room that only a monk can enter. During my research in Bồ Đà Pagoda, Master Monk Thích Thanh Vinh granted me the special privilege of visiting the exhibition room and the storeroom where about five hundred woodblocks for printing amulets and sutras are preserved.¹³ When a monk takes out the woodblocks to print amulets, he first must chose an auspicious day and hold a ritual.

THE CHANGING WORLD OF AMULET MAKERS

Artisans who mass-produce amulets from a metal stencil omit the rituals and precautions undertaken when a ritual master hand paints an amulet or activates an amulet carved onto a woodblock for printing in his temple, or when a carver makes a block. The stencils are secular objects that do not require special care. Above all, amulets produced from stencils are not animated in the act of their mechanical reproduction; without the power of resident gods, they are inexpensive scraps of printed paper. Ritual masters purchase the mass-produced amulets at the New Year in bundles of two or three hundred for two thousand to two thousand five hundred VNĐ, while they would pay five thousand VNĐ for a single woodblock-printed amulet. The ritual masters empower mass-produced amulets in their own temples and sell them to clients for from twenty thousand to fifty thousand VNĐ. If the ritual master comes to the clients’ home to make a ritual, he will bring the purchased amulets with him and empower them there. The many inexperienced ritual masters that one finds in Vietnam today are only capable of using mass-produced amulets; they do not know how to write or print their own amulets. Many consider the ritual master’s work an easy means to a high income and the respect of one’s clients. Fresh out of middle school or high school, young men apprentice themselves to a public or private temple for a few months, seldom for more than a year, where they learn the ritual procedures and related practices and master a few Chinese characters. Although the young men have not taken the time to learn complicated magical procedures and incantations, they make rituals and amulets on the basis of their partial knowledge, buying mass-produced amulets from the shops in Hanoi, Bắc Ninh, and Bắc Giang townships. Their amulets are considered less powerful than those made by experienced ritual masters and they do not enjoy the same volume of clients as the experienced ritual masters.

But these inexperienced new ritual masters are not the only users of the mass-produced amulets. On the twentieth day of the eleventh lunar month in 2004,

I saw ritual master Trần Minh Thủy use a mass-produced amulet in a house-protecting ritual for a client. He empowered the amulet using traditional procedures, inviting the spirits into the amulet, crossing his fingers as he recited an incantation, and writing in the air with incense to increase the power and mystery of the amulet. Mr. Thủy said, “Until 2003 I still used amulets made by traditional methods for my clients, and these amulets were more sacred and effective than those sold in the market nowadays.” I asked him why these new amulets were less powerful and he said, “People who print amulets using metal stencils are not ritual masters, so they do not observe taboos in their eating and living. In addition, because they mass-produce amulets without centering their minds on this task, the amulet’s sacredness is reduced.” The ritual masters I spoke with all agreed that the ready-made amulets they buy in the market in Hanoi, Bắc Giang, and Bắc Ninh are less sacred than those made traditionally at a ritually appropriate hour and with a ritual master inviting the spirits to incarnate the amulet during the process. However, the clients overwhelmingly choose the cheaper printed amulets.

Among those who make amulets, only monks are not married. Other producers of amulets have families, but they are expected to observe various prohibitions related to their work. Ritual masters in general and amulet makers in particular should never eat *mè* fish (*hypophthalmichthys*) which has a strong smell, dog meat, buffalo meat, garlic, shrimp sauce, or carp. According to ritual master Trần Minh Thủy, eating those foods would pollute the mouth, preventing the spirit master from effectively invoking the spirits. In addition, a ritual master must avoid sleeping with his wife on the first, fourteenth, fifteenth, and thirtieth days of the lunar calendar. A ritual master should be especially careful when he is making amulets, not attending funerals and avoiding his wife when she is menstruating. However, the market economy has influenced not only the way ritual masters practice, it has also changed the way they think and their sense of professional ethics. Participating in rituals made by ritual masters Nguyễn Văn Sinh, Nguyễn Văn Quý, Nguyễn Văn Quyền, Nguyễn Văn Duân, and Nguyễn Văn Nam in Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang provinces, I realized that they were no longer performing a ritual before they started writing an amulet, and they do not know how to cross their fingers, recite incantations, and write with an incense stick in the traditional way. Only ritual master Trần Minh Thủy still does this. In addition, the other ritual masters seem to have no reservation about sleeping with their wives on the days when they make amulets, eating garlic, buffalo meat, and baked squid, or drinking wine and beer. When I asked if these actions reduce the efficacy of the amulets, ritual master Sinh answered, “The seal that the ritual master places on the completed amulet is the most important element, not how the ritual is conducted.” On the other hand, ritual master Trần Minh Thủy, who strictly observes the prohibitions, said, “There are many factors that make an amulet powerful, including the client’s belief in its power, taboos observed by the ritual masters, the conduct of the ritual, and the ritual master’s calling on the spirits to empower the amulet. These all have to be taken seriously.”

CONCLUSION

My description of ritual masters and the production of empowered and activated woodblocks recalls Walter BENJAMIN's discussion of *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1969), but with a novel twist. The mass-produced amulet, devoid of a context of ritual production, is widely regarded as less sacred, powerful, or efficacious than the painted amulet produced with magical incantations or the woodblock amulet whose production combines ritual as well as craft in order to reproduce the magical aura of the original painted amulet. This much, Benjamin would expect: the mass-produced amulet, purchased in the market, lacks the "aura" imbued in a context of ritual production. And yet, mass-produced amulets can still be activated through the ritual master's magic, albeit a lesser magic. They are, with hand-painted and woodblocked amulets, the objects of an ambiguous transaction between ritual masters and clients: The mass-produced amulets' commodity status blurs when the client sets down an offering of cash, since the amount is understood but unstated. Similar to a cash gift at a wedding, the gesture preserves the notion that things pertaining to the gods are not bought and sold. The market transforms and reduces but does not efface the aura of the ritual master's work. Ritual masters adjust to market demand; they provide their clients with cheaper but less efficacious amulets, and the market sustains more but less competent ritual masters. Even so, the reputedly most traditional ritual masters still command the greatest popularity.

In the face of these developments, it remains for the museum to understand, document, and respect the rich cultural heritage contained in the woodblock that I collected for the Museum. Through my conversations with the ritual masters and my observations of their work, I came to appreciate that the woodblock was not simply an artifact, an illustration of carving and printing techniques and religious practices. Unlike the stencils widely used today, it remains a sacred and potentially powerful object. During my research, I went to Mr. Nguyễn Văn Chuyền's family and asked if they had deactivated the amulet before selling it to Mr. Mạnh. Mr. Chuyền said, "We just burned incense to report to our ancestors and asked permission to sell the woodblock, and we didn't invite a ritual master home." In other words, the amulet woodblock that I was researching had not been properly desacralized; it was like a woodblock in the possession of a ritual master, awaiting future use, but the Museum was storing it with secular objects of a similar material type, such as Đông Hồ woodblocks for petition sheets and woodblock genre paintings. In consultation with the ritual masters who have helped me in my work, I made several suggestions to my colleagues regarding the storage of religious objects—amulets, amulet woodblocks, statues, altar lintels, parallel couplet boards—recommending that they be kept in a separate place on specially designed shelves so that conservators will be reminded to treat them differently from other objects.¹⁴ For example, when cleaning or examining these objects, the conservators should not eat dog meat and garlic, and women should not come into close contact with religious objects while they are menstruating even if the material has

been desacralized. The heritage value of these objects and the museum's commitment to preserve and document them necessitates an understanding of and respect for their power.

NOTES

1. To protect informants, real names are not revealed in this paper.
2. On his initiation, a sorcerer receives a certificate which, at New Year, in the hour of the rat (midnight), he spreads on the altar and asks the deities to assist him in his work for another year. On the twenty-fifth day of the twelfth month, he again spreads the amulet, this time to offer thanksgiving.
3. During my research in Bắc Ninh, Bắc Giang, and Hanoi, I identified approximately ten different kinds of house-protecting amulets. The material of the amulets (bronze, paper, mirror, cloth, porcelain, stone, wood) and their contents are different. Amulets may be buried in the mouth of a toad or a decapitated dog to use the animal as a messenger. Gold buried in a turtle shell is a wish for good business. Usually, there are two ways of using house-protecting amulets; one is to bury the amulet in the ground, the other is to paste or hang it on the wall.
4. I brought Mr. Chuy²ên to the VME to visit the Museum and the storage place. After that, Mr. Chuy²ên agreed to sell the block to the VME, but he insists that the VME should preserve the block appropriately, a concern I have subsequently shared.
5. An amulet incorporates elements from Buddhism and Daoism, and the practices of Buddhist esoteric sects have contributed to amulet production. At the top of the woodblock that the VME purchased are seal characters for "Buddha." At the bottom are ideographs for the three jewels of Buddhism: the Buddha, the Dharma (teachings), and the Sangha (the community of monks).
6. This character is a composite of Chinese ideographs for "rain," "water," "vehicle," "balance," and "ear."
7. On the VME woodblock, this complex configuration is further embellished with a stylized representation of the ideograph *sur* (action) outside each section of the octagon and four stylized representations of the word "seal."
8. The Museum's amulet displays a seated tiger. Ritual master Nguy²ễn Văn Quy²ên in Bắc Ninh said, "In principle, the designs must include five tigers with five different colors representing the five directions (a white tiger guards the west, a green tiger the east, a black tiger the north, a red tiger the south, and a yellow tiger the center, each with its tiger protector." However, many people use the image of a single yellow tiger to represent all five directions. In this scheme, the yellow tiger is considered the most important because he guards the center and has the magical capacity to transform into east, west, south, and north. Ritual master Huy²ễn Ph²ụng explained, "The [VME's] amulet is for protecting the house site and the yellow tiger is sufficient."
9. An "outside" border of chrysanthemum, persimmon flower, and stylized "longevity" patterns frames the potent "inside" of the VME woodblock.
10. Persimmon trees are usually cut after harvesting their fruit at the end of the year. If the tree is cut when it is in flower or during the rainy season (in the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth lunar months), the wood is either too dry and likely to split, turn moldy, or become cracked and warped.
11. Statue carvers also perform this ritual to initiate carving (KENDALL, VÕ, and NGUY²ÊN in this issue).

12. Ritual master Vũ Văn Quyền in Bắc Ninh province said, “A dog is a sacred animal. It is the guardian of the house and property. There is also a story about a dog leading the Buddha to the mountains to practice magic.”

13. The ink, penetrating the wood of the block, helps prevent fungus. The red ink is made from a soft red stone found in Lạng Sơn province, and the black ink is made of ash of bamboo leaves or soot from a train.

14. To preserve these objects, we should make bamboo or wooden supports, and try not to use iron because this material will oxidize and harm objects. Moreover, the harsh appearance of the iron mounts destroys the sacred atmosphere that is appropriate for religious objects.

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