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## The *Thầy*: Masters in Huế, Vietnam

### **Abstract**

The Vietnamese in the former capital of Huế regularly refer to different kinds of masters, called *thầy*, for help in dealing with the various events of life (birth, illness, accidents, miscarriages, etc.). The *thầy* help intercede with the cosmic deities and supernatural beings who are believed to control or influence fate. The present short article, based on one year of fieldwork in Huế, gives an overview of various types of *thầy* and compares their practices.

**Key words :** Huế—Vietnam—beliefs—superstitions

THE PEOPLE OF Huế, the former capital of Annam, have preserved many traditions, cults, and ceremonies that attempt to explain and control the vagaries of fortune. When they wish to contact the world beyond and understand the reasons for sickness and distress they turn to a group of practitioners known as *thầy*. *Thầy* is a term of respect meaning “teacher” or “master,” and is followed by a qualifier indicating the practitioner’s specialty. The term *thầy* thus covers a wide range of practitioners; I have chosen to apply it to the entire network of people so addressed by the inhabitants of Huế. The diversity of their activities provides an excellent example of the religious pluralism of this Indochinese people, who live in an area where a number of cultural and religious traditions meet.

At the beginning of this century much information about the spiritual customs and beliefs of the Vietnamese was gathered by French colonial officers, some relying on secondhand information from Vietnamese informants (DIGUET 1906, COULET 1930) and others producing more substantial reports. Georges DUMOUTIER (1908), a genuine researcher, gave rich and detailed descriptions of Vietnamese physiognomists and their system of interpreting the human face. Léopold CADIÈRE (1984), a Catholic priest who lived in Huế Province for more than thirty years (and who is buried there), compiled a competent and quite extensive survey of religious practices and beliefs relating to birth, death, trees, and stones, to mention just a few of the areas he studied. Perhaps because he was a priest, however, he made little effort to understand his data in a systematic fashion, leading to such debatable decisions as the inclusion of the *thầy* in the category “superstitions.”

Two remarkable studies have been published in French on the subject of spirit mediums and possession. One concerns North Vietnam in the 1950s (DURAND 1959), and the other deals with North Vietnamese repatriates in France during the 1960s (SIMON and SIMON BAROUH 1973). The books describe the mediums’ ceremonies, their pantheon, and their social organization, but the discussion of possession is pretty much limited to the collective communal practice known as *lên đồng* (ride the servant). There is no

consideration of the role of the medium as a healer who, in the context of private family ceremonies, addresses the problems of the individual.

Since the 1975 revolution most *thầy* have hidden their activities, even therapeutic practices and simple rituals to communicate with the spirits, because of the Marxist government's efforts to suppress "superstitious activities." Fortune-telling, astrology, and the divination of auspicious days nevertheless continue on a daily basis, even, probably, among the government leaders themselves.<sup>1</sup>

I have visited Huế regularly since 1990, conducting fieldwork there between September 1992 and September 1993. My research focused on the healing practices of the boat people (*sampaniers*)<sup>2</sup> living on the Perfume River. During this time I met several *thầy*, recorded interviews with them and their visitors, and observed their practices and many of their ceremonies. The present article begins with a description of the various types of *thầy* practitioners, then illustrates the similarities and differences in function, at the same time devoting special attention to the place they occupy in society. Unreferenced quotes are from interviews with Huế-area *thầy*, whom I prefer to keep anonymous for their protection.

This report is primarily descriptive in nature, presenting the testimony of the *thầy* themselves, introducing something of the spiritual beliefs found in Huế, and showing some of the opportunities available to the individual for addressing existential problems. It is my hope that this article will contribute to future comparative studies with neighboring countries and other provinces in Vietnam so that we might arrive at a deeper understanding of the various Southeast Asian folk belief systems and the relationships between them.

#### *The Thầy Pháp (Master of Magical Verses)*

The most popular and visible among the *thầy*, and the one most tolerated by the authorities, is the *thầy pháp*. His high status is due to his mastery of the written Chinese language and, in some cases, of the ancient Vietnamese script (*nôm*), skills that are rather unusual nowadays. The *thầy pháp*'s practices are presently experiencing a certain revival, though legal restrictions still remain.

"For two years now we have been able to work, but not to unite," said one of my informants. A master from a community near Huế commented, "The association still exists, and when the local People's Committee accepts it we are able to practice certain of the family rites. But it all depends on the region. In areas without much freedom the *thầy* cannot show themselves. In this village I can do anything I like, but in others such activities are forbidden. Ours is not a free profession."

The *thầy pháp* learns his craft from a master, with whom he may live for many years or, at the very least, visit regularly for the purpose of study. He must pay for this education, though he also receives payment whenever he performs a ceremony. Sometimes a master teaches the occupation to his son, but may at the same time receive other students in his home. At present the better-known *thầy pháp* generally have several students, since during the more than fifteen years that they had to hide themselves they were unable to transmit their knowledge to anyone except immediate family members.

In the center of the *thầy pháp*'s house one usually finds a large altar topped with an empty throne; this is dedicated to the Jade Emperor, Ngọc Hoàng, the Taoist deity who governs over the workings of destiny.<sup>3</sup> *Thầy pháp* do not claim to be Taoists, however. Some may have attended ceremonies at the local Taoist temple, but others are not even aware of its existence.<sup>4</sup> If anything the religious interests of the *thầy pháp* are eclectic. "I'm going to a Buddhist pagoda," a *thầy pháp* once told me, "one needs the three religions" (*tam giáo*).<sup>5</sup>

*Thầy pháp* who worship Lao Tzu (called by them Thái Thượng Lão Quân) will often hang the sage's portrait above the altar. Next to this are shelves lined with the books used by the *thầy pháp*. Some are works on Chinese divination, which he refers to when people consult him about major decisions. "Before a marriage," a *thầy pháp* commented, "I see if the birth dates of the bride and the groom match. Later the couple invites me to the reception." Certain texts are used for the rituals in which the *thầy pháp* petitions for the intercession and protection of the spirits. The *thầy* also uses his books to divine the cause of sickness, since it is believed that the place and date of the patient's birth destine him or her to certain maladies.

The *thầy pháp* can interpret the influences of Heaven, which is why he is consulted when an auspicious day or hour must be chosen for some activity. In the past the imperial observatory issued a calendar every year that listed a certain number of auspicious days, as determined by the heavenly constellations.<sup>6</sup>

The *thầy pháp* are also active in ancestral rites and mourning ceremonies (especially in those for the evil dead). I have seen, for example, a *thầy pháp* performing the annual rite for the founding ancestors (*kỳ cào*) of a family group (*van*) of *sampaniers* on the Perfume River. Assisted by his students and accompanied by a group of musicians, he read the placets<sup>7</sup> for the family in a long ceremony, a kind of litany to the spirits. Quite often the *thầy pháp* maintains the family register from which he recites the names of the ancestors during this ritual and other such ceremonies as funerals. He also reads texts that are composed or bought for the ceremonies, draws up funeral tablets, and writes on the cloth banderoles that hang from the long bam-

boo poles inserted into the ground when somebody dies.

Although not traditionally in charge of the task, the *thầy pháp* is now asked by the *sampaniers* to read the placets in their rites for fishermen (*cầu ngư*), since no one in the *sampaniers*' own community knows how to do so anymore. The *thầy pháp* is also invited to read the lists of names during the rites for the founding ancestors and spirits of hamlets and villages. "If there is a celebration for a village I decide on the date and conduct the ceremony. Everybody in the village and neighboring communities invites me," a *thầy pháp* in an isolated rural area told me.

Another important activity of the *thầy pháp* is dealing with sickness and misfortune. The *thầy pháp* take their knowledge essentially from their texts, basing their diagnoses on horoscopes or fortunes. None of the seven *thầy* that I met ever enters a state of possession, and thus none practices in the way a medium does—that is, they do not enter into a form of communication in which they or the people around them ask questions of the spirits, who answer. They do, however, make requests of the spirits on the basis of the diagnoses they have reached.<sup>8</sup> A renowned *thầy pháp* informed me, "If people need me, they come to my house. I have a lot of books and I can help. If there is trouble in a family I ask them to open this book at random, then I identify the reason for the accident or sickness. But I do not wear the scarf and the spirits do not take possession of me. I do not dance for them, I do not sing. The answer is in the script. I read it and that's all."

When someone sick comes to consult him, the *thầy pháp* first asks the client his date and hour of birth and the time he became ill. The master then turns to his books. As one *thầy pháp* explained, "It's like a doctor checking the origins of a disease; to effect a cure you must first check the books to find the sickness and the type of day on which it occurred. If I were to get sick today, for example, I would look up what sort of day today is and find that it is the day *linh*. I would then look under *linh* in another book, see what it says, and use the information to perform the rites."

Searching his lists of evil beings and their characteristics, the *thầy pháp* determines how the patient might have provoked them and thus become ill. In this way he determines the formulas to call the most important of the evil beings in order to destroy them, subdue them, or drive them out of the ill person. Even malicious spirits can be easily deceived because, as a *thầy pháp* assured us, they are not very clever. One *thầy pháp* summed up the entire process as follows:

If someone is ill I can tell them where the sickness comes from. If the cause is spirits (*vong*) the patient makes offerings and afterwards I heal him. I take the book and three incense sticks, then I pray. For [spirit-

induced] diseases, like for those caused by *ma quỷ* (diabolic or malevolent spirits), we have to use sacred lyrics. These spirits cause sickness in those they harass. When someone becomes sick he comes to my house and I open my book to find what type of disease it is and what the origin is. For example, I found that these men here work in the mountain cutting trees,<sup>9</sup> and that they should leave the forest when it is bad for them to be there because they are disturbing some of the spirits.

The *thầy pháp* will visit gravely ill patients whom the doctor has been unable to cure. He attempts to exorcise the malevolent spirits (*trừ ma* or *trừ tà*) through either threats or conciliation, depending on the diagnosis he arrives at from reading the stars. For this purpose he participates in healing ceremonies led by mediums (*thầy đồng họ*), for which he procures special ritual papers to be burnt and at which he sometimes reads the placets.

If someone performs the rites without success he should try calling the *ngài*.<sup>10</sup> The medium burns the ritual papers, mixes them with holy water, and has the sick person drink the mix.

Speaking of a female patient, the *thầy* explains:

If the papers are not prepared she will become insane. Rites must be performed to protect her so that the malevolent spirit does not seize her anymore. This sick woman came first to see me, then visited the medium. You must consult the book and then carry out the rites. In this way you can understand what kind of illness it is, on what type of day it started, and at what time it will be gravest. If the cause is not a spirit then the patient must take medicine.

In order to protect families from problems caused by the spirits of the dead (family or otherwise), the *thầy pháp* writes texts that the medium keeps at the foot of his altar.

I also make *koan* [letters of recommendation] to be left with the medium on behalf of children who are difficult to raise. For example, there are people whose children refuse to eat properly. Such people come to my home and I write passages on fabric; these are papers directed toward earlier generations. For example, aunts who died childless (*cô ruột*) and subsequently harass their relative's children are a type of *ma trung*, family ghost. You have to write a *koan* to protect these later generations.

The *thầy pháp* also writes the ritual papers that are attached to houses to protect the family and discourage ghosts from entering. He participates in the construction rites for new buildings by preparing a piece of red cloth with the Taoist symbol for yin and yang in its center, accompanied by some magical words asking the beneficial spirits for protection.

The *thầy pháp* can cure some mental illnesses but not all. This is a task that many *thầy* are unwilling to accept, since it is less well accepted and involves greater risks at a variety of levels.

In those cases where demons (*ma quỷ*) are involved I can help but not in cases of neuropathy (*thần kinh*). There you have to see a doctor. I can usually help with sickness caused by ghosts (*bệnh tà*), though not always, since there are so many types of spirits (*âm binh*) causing problems. It is important to call the spirit that gave rise to the sickness. *Binh* are soldiers and the *âm* are the dead who have nobody to perform the rites for them. They are those who died at sea and those who died in the hills. They may be traders or soldiers who died in accidents. The effectiveness of the cure depends on the identification of these spirit forms. Sometimes one can heal in a matter of days, sometimes it may take years. But I have stopped working with people like this.

The *thầy pháp* also performs public or private ceremonies relating to construction, with the *thầy* asking the local spirits for protection. In this they are distinguished from the *thầy phong thủy*, the geomancers who practice the Chinese science of *phong thủy* (wind and water). The latter's duties precede those of the *thầy pháp*, involving calculations related to the location and positioning of the house, tomb, road, bridge, canal, or whatever else is to be built in order to determine whether the site is indeed appropriate.

For additional income the *thầy's* family often makes cult objects out of paper, objects like dolls, clothing, shoes, hats, and boats. They make these for themselves and for the mediums, who may then sell them to stores or at their own place. Because of their use of paper the *thầy* have come to be known in ordinary speech as "the ones who perform rites with paper." The most renowned *thầy pháp* rely exclusively on activities involving the use of paper, especially in the more populated areas. With the boom in construction and the increase in economic decisions that have to be taken, their advice is often solicited and their profession quite profitable. On the other hand, we met a *thầy pháp* in a rural zone who told us he could not earn a thing because people were so poor that they could not pay for the rites after they bought the offerings, paper objects, and pieces of fabric with the texts written on them.

The richest of the *thầy pháp* dress up lavishly for the ceremonies, donning a kind of silk kimono, embroidered shoes, and a three-cornered hat with pendants. The more modest are content with the long traditional black tunic (*áo dài*) with long tails over white trousers, and the black headband worn by men.

To recapitulate, the *thầy pháp* are active in public and private ceremonies involving local spirits, the ancestors of a family, and the founders of a village, in rites to cure sickness, and all other activities involving the use of texts to communicate with the world beyond.

### *The Thầy Cúng (Master of Ceremonies)*

The *thầy cúng* are a type of lay Buddhist “master.” They are people who were brought to Buddhist temples at a young age, invested with the novice’s robe, and taught the ancient Vietnamese characters along with written Chinese. Otherwise they remain laymen throughout their lives.

The *thầy cúng* do not consider it necessary to possess extraordinary powers—it is sufficient that they study seriously and lead an honest life according to the Buddhist precepts. The *thầy cúng* dedicate their lives to the Buddha, who is regarded as the protector of humanity. The numerous texts they use do not differ fundamentally in function from those of the *thầy pháp*. One *thầy cúng* told me that the Buddhist texts contain as many as 8,400 ways to help people live better. These are the counsels left by the Lord Buddha in his infinite wisdom.

The *thầy cúng*, like the *thầy pháp*, are active principally in private homes, where he conducts ceremonies and prayers: rites of thanksgiving, funerary prayers at the time of mourning (*cầu siêu*), rites to request happiness (*cầu âm*), rites to change a person’s destiny (*thúc mán*), rites to expel evil spirits haunting young children (*quan sát*), and various other rituals such as the recitation of texts during the construction of a house. He also serves as a fortune-teller, using horoscopes to determine the best dates for weddings.

The *thầy cúng* sometimes use small pagodas or special altars (*điện*) consecrated to the Buddha or his feminine form Quan Âm, as well as to the Holy Mothers (*thánh mẫu*). Although *thầy cúng* are fervent Buddhists with altars to Buddha Śākyamuni in front of their ancestral altars in the center of their homes, many admit to visiting the temple of Hòn Chén to pray to the Holy Mother of the Sky, Thánh Mẫu Thiên Y A Na. This is necessary because, when called upon to treat maladies caused by evil spirits, they must address the saints, spirits, or mandarin deities of that pantheon. Furthermore, in such cases they must frequently work with the mediums, who are not literate. The *thầy cúng*, with his ability to write, adds the virtue of the written word to the rite.



The *thầy cúng* recite the same printed placets that the *thầy pháp* does; dressed in a long grey garment similar to the robe of monks, they chant the text while beating time on a wooden drum (*mõ*), as the Buddhists do when they recite the sutras.

He also uses other temple objects, such as the small bells that are thought to drive away evil spirits in the rites of exorcism. He also administers paper amulets that are burned and then swallowed, or are kept on one's person, placed under one's pillow, or put under the roof of the house. These amulets do not differ greatly from those collected from mediums who use ideograms as well as a system of characters claimed to be Sanskrit (*phạn*) though resembling Tibetan much more (but being neither of these). The *thầy cúng* can, however, use texts to make amulets appropriate for different occasions.

To sum up, the *thầy cúng*'s activities relate primarily to private rites and worship, especially in the case of funeral ceremonies; he treats certain diseases where a supernatural cause is suspected, and also gives information related to horoscopes and thus to the events of life.

#### *The Thầy Đông Hò, the Medium*<sup>11</sup>

The *thầy đông hò* (a name apparently peculiar to Huế) does not come to his profession as the result of a long apprenticeship like the *thầy pháp* or *thầy cúng*. Rather, he is chosen by the spirits, generally after a long and painful illness, and is thus under oath to serve them. In the process of his selection he experiences the classical transformation from pathological possession to a ritual possession of a sacrificial type. From this process he derives his power to heal.

The *thầy đông hò* also makes amulets (*bùa*) or talismans (*ngải*) for protection against ghosts (*ma*), malevolent spirits (*ma quỷ, âm binh*), and evil dead or wandering spirits (*cô hồn*).

When performing a diagnosis, the *thầy đông hò* first determines what kind of ghost is involved, how to rid the patient of it, or how at least to reach an agreement with it. Both as a medium and as a healer or protector, the *thầy đông hò* is able to distribute benefits only because he himself serves and is under the protection of a powerful spirit, whom he calls master. This spirit protects his fate (*thầy họ mạng*) and "rides" him regularly during seances to give him advice on healing.

The protectors of the *sampanier* mediums are, curiously enough, the Thượng (a word that generally means "high," but is used to refer to the Montagnards, the non-Vietnamese mountain-dwelling populations). Many mediums claim descent from the ninth prince of the mountains, Chín Thượng Ngàn, whose wooden sculpture they keep on the altar in their

floating houses. For ceremonies in which they call their spirit master, the *thầy đồng họ* smoke pipes and wear necklaces and clothing decorated with a flower design. These accessories are all associated with the mountain people (*kinh*) in the Vietnamese imagination. The *thầy đồng họ* also revere the tiger,<sup>12</sup> an image of which is present at the base of every altar. They regard the tiger as a powerful spirit, especially effective for curing infants' sicknesses. Some of the mediums possess skulls and bits of bones, teeth, and claws that they use for protection and healing, and that they guard like precious relics. Their altars are surrounded with flags of different colors: red, white, blue, yellow, and green. Sometimes the medium waves these flags over the head of patients during exorcism rites in an effort to chase away evil spirits.

The medium stores his amulets in a coffin placed before the altar. The amulets are pieces of white or yellow paper on which ideograms of a kind are scribbled with brush and red ink, with special seals dipped in the same ink sometimes added. Believed to bring good luck, these amulets contain cinnabar, a reddish mercury oxide, and are given at times to families who have to safekeep them for a time in a place specified by the medium. A medium who diagnoses an illness in a child may also obtain a text written by a *thầy pháp* for the generals of the otherworld, asking them to protect the sick child. The texts are regarded as talismans (*bùa*), though some see them as contracts with the malignant spirits. In most cases they are written in red and black on pieces of yellow (rarely white) fabric. "If a child does not want to eat," says a medium, "I have a letter made requesting the *ngài* to nourish the child until he reaches twelve. This is written on a piece of fabric. In a certain way I am like the mailman." This practice is most commonly employed for children difficult to feed and raise. It is also used to protect pregnant women who have previously miscarried a child, and to aid families haunted by the above-mentioned *cô ruột* spirits.

In ceremonies that involve spirit-possession by the medium he is assisted by different "servants," known as *đồng* or *ông đồng* in the case of men and *bà đồng* or *bà cốt* in the case of women.<sup>13</sup> After the spirit invoked by the medium comes it may incarnate itself in one after another of these persons, who then speak in its name. The *đồng* wears a scarf and tunic that varies in color depending on what spirit is called. When the spirit arrives the *đồng* shivers, then utters a loud shriek. If the *đồng* is dancing to *chầu vãn* (songs of praise that accompany the rite), he may collapse for a few seconds. In certain seances several *đồng* may enter the action alternatively as a means of calling up a variety of spirits.

The mediums share the common people's life. Generally they drink only a little rice alcohol (*rượu thuốc*) that they mix with roots, flowers, leaves, or animals as a kind of medicine or tonic. They must never be intoxicated

during a ceremony.

The *thầy đông họ* are traditional practitioners who integrate the powers of a medium with a more or less sophisticated knowledge of traditional Vietnamese medicine and medicinal plants. They pray to a complex pantheon derived from both Taoism and Confucianism but also including the local beliefs and cults of Huế. Some of these are believed to originate with the Cham people, who lived in the area before the Việt came.

*The Thầy Phu Thuy (Sorcerer, Master of Amulets and Water)*

Like the mediums, the *thầy phu thuy* derive their powers from higher spirits, whom they conjure to earth. The spirits then possess the *thầy phu thuy*, using the practitioners' bodies to speak through.

The *thầy phu thuy* are called the masters of amulets (*phu*) and water (*thuy*) because they so often use water in their rites. They are regarded as sorcerers, and are believed to possess such evil powers as the ability to make people sick, change the course of their lives, and drive them crazy. They are also thought capable of hypnotizing people, finding those who are lost, suggesting ideas from long distances, and arousing the passions with love elixirs. Presently it is quite difficult to meet this type of practitioner in the urban areas because they are outlawed, and also because they frighten the inhabitants so much.<sup>14</sup>

It is said that if you are possessed by a *thầy phu thuy* it is quite difficult to rid yourself of his spirit unless you are able to find a more powerful sorcerer to break the spell. According to the *sampaniers* there are very powerful *thầy phu thuy* among the Thượng. In other mountainous regions they are also called *thầy mo* or *thầy tà*.

*The Thầy Bói (Fortunetellers)*

The *thầy bói*, a well-known and regularly visited figure in the local public square, is primarily consulted for the purpose of divination or fortune-telling. Called *thầy số* in some regions, he is not thought of as possessing any real magic powers. His methods are varied. He may read the client's palms and face, use old coins or large beans to predict future events, or make skillful calculations on the basis of the client's birth date. The *thầy bói* is an important part of Huế society, and is regularly consulted at the beginning of the year, before important decisions are made, or after unfortunate events (other than illnesses). DUMOUTIER (1908) affirms that some *thầy bói* are itinerants, working in the streets wherever they wander. He distinguishes them from the *thầy coi chỉ tay* (palmists) and the *thầy tướng số* (physiognomists who analyze the face by dividing it into twelve sections, each one corresponding to a certain realm such as destiny, wealth, or family). I never came

SUMMARY TABLE: <i>Thầy</i> in Huế								
Name of <i>Thầy</i>	Education	Basic texts	Skills	Methods	Setting	Equipment/dress	Fee	Gender
<i>Thầy pháp</i>	Master, traditional texts	Chinese and <i>nôm</i> works on Taoism and cosmology	Diagnosis, astrology, geomancy, ancestor worship ceremonies	Text reading, prayer, counseling, use of talismans and funeral tablets	Private homes ( <i>thầy's</i> and clients'), tombs private land	Musical instruments hat and kimono, distinctive shoes, paper offerings, texts	Fee charged	Males
<i>Thầy cúng</i>	Buddhist temple education, books	Chinese and <i>nôm</i> texts on Buddhism and cosmology	Diagnosis, healing, funerals	Reading of sacred texts, counseling, use of talismans	Small temples, homes, tombs	Grey robe, wooden bell, vegetarian offerings books	No fee	Males
<i>Thầy đông họ</i>	Master, other-worldly protector following illness	Oral transmission, folk religion, animism	Diagnosis, exorcising and recalling spirits	Appeal to beneficial spirits during possession, use of talismans	Private homes	Musical instruments, eagle, papers, offerings of alcohol, cigarettes; dress differs according to spirit	No fee	Males
<i>Thầy phù thủy</i>	Sign from spirit	Oral transmission, witchcraft, animism	Diagnosis, dealing with spirits (good, bad)	Use of spells	<i>Thầy's</i> house	Talismans, offerings	Fee charged	Males
<i>Thầy bói</i>	Master, books	Chinese and <i>nôm</i> books, cosmology	Fortune-telling	Palmistry, face reading, use of cards, horoscopes	<i>Thầy's</i> house or public places	Cards, other instruments of divination	Fee charged	Males, females
<i>Thầy lạng</i>	Master, books	Sino-Vietnamese traditional medicine, folk medicine	Healing	Acupuncture, blood-letting, phytotherapy	Markets, homes	Traditional and folk medicines	Fee charged	Males, females
<i>Thầy đồng y</i>	University, books, teacher	Sino-Vietnamese traditional medicine	Healing	Acupuncture, blood-letting, phytotherapy	Homes ( <i>thầy's</i> and clients')	Traditional medicine, white shirt	Fee charged	Males, females

across such distinctions in Huế, where the *thầy bói* engage in all of these different practices, though they may have one area in which they are particularly competent.

*The Thầy Lặng and Thầy Đông Y*<sup>15</sup>

The *thầy lặng* is a doctor of traditional Eastern medicine who moves from marketplace to marketplace making injections and selling different kinds of drugs. The *thầy lặng* generally has few formal qualifications, and does not possess a university education. Some mediums hide their esoteric and spiritual practices under the guise and name of the *thầy lặng*.

In some ways the *thầy lặng* is similar to the *thầy đông y*, except that the latter has a more commercial function. The *thầy đông y* is an Oriental doctor who practices acupuncture, acupressure, moxibustion, and bloodletting (phlebotomy). He also prescribes and prepares herbal medicines according to the pharmacopoeia of northern and southern Vietnam (*thuốc bắc* and *thuốc nam*). His practice is totally legitimate and has deep roots in Asian history. I mention him here because he is part of the repertoire of Vietnamese medicine. His practice is based on the rich body of Sino-Vietnamese medicine that is based on traditional Asian notions of energy, the balance of hot and cold, and equilibrium between the five elements.

This ensemble of practitioners is to some extent peculiar to Huế.<sup>16</sup> Its members offer a wide range of skills and activities to answer the various needs of Vietnamese life, yet each practitioner maintains his own specific clientele depending on the sociocultural stratum he serves. Next to the *thầy lặng* and the *thầy đông y*, who, with their long history as medical practitioners are easily approached, the most sought after are, no doubt, the diviners. Even if young “scientific types” do not give much credence to these practices, the curiosity to explore them often outweighs the will to resist. Although young people claim not to believe in the fortune-tellers, they do not hesitate to consult divining sticks before wedding ceremonies and at the pagoda during the traditional New Year’s visit.

The *thầy pháp* too are frequently consulted. They often participate in the ancestral rites held by prestigious and tradition-minded families. The function they are most commonly asked to perform is the preparation of talismans to be placed under the roof during the construction of a house or boat.

The *thầy cúng* develop a network of clients centered on the pagoda. Although officially outlawed, they are said to exercise their skills even in homes of Communist cadres, who have them come in secret if, for example, their sick child is not getting better. Their robe alone, connecting them to the Buddha, bestows a certain aura on them that protects them.

The *thầy đồng hồ* are for the most part socially invisible because their activity—possession—is severely suppressed. Some of them have suffered fines, beatings, or short-term imprisonment. I visited one medium, who lived on the land in a remote rural area, at night under great precautions. Because of threats from the police he now restricts his activities to saying prayers and giving offerings. I visited another medium in a place of spirit worship (and was subsequently arrested by the police). I have also been able to work with several of them who live on the lagoons and on the river. Their clientele is mostly petty merchants and illiterate people from the lower classes, devotees of the *lên đồng* celebrations.

These practitioners may be categorized according to several characteristics: their education; their level of familiarity with the various writing systems; the type of references they use in their practice; their relations, or lack of them, with spirits, ghosts, or wandering souls; the general nature of their activities as therapeutic, informative, or maleficent; and, finally, the economic aspects of their activities. I have tried to organize these criteria in the summary table.

Although certain practices, such as the use of astrology, are performed in a similar manner by several types of *thầy*, I wish to emphasize the complementarity of their approaches and functions. I am particularly interested in those dimensions of their therapies in which the patient follows a path of healing that requires the use of Eastern and Western medicine as well as consultation with *thầy pháp* or *thầy cúng*, who, in turn, work with the mediums (unless the latter detect the influence of an evil spell, and are unwilling to risk interfering with the work of a sorcerer).

The various religiophilosophical systems of Vietnam operate in a complex form of syncretism to produce the concept of the human body and the view of life, destiny, and human freedom held by these practitioners.

The traditional religion of Vietnam can be grasped only with some difficulty within frames apparently too rigid to catch the luxuriance of the reality that pervades the collective and the individual life in its most solemn as well as its most everyday aspects. This luxuriance, the result of deep beliefs and habitual rites solidly rooted in the history of the Vietnamese people, and of the influence of outside forces and borrowings, reaches in certain aspects the highest points of a rich religious meditation, and in other aspects it harks back to the most archaic religions. (Translation of SIMON and SIMON BAROUH 1973, 73)

The presence of so many types of *thầy* mediating the relations between humans and the world beyond, as well as their participation in so many facets

of everyday life, clearly illustrate the incomparable richness of traditional Vietnamese spiritual life, especially in the culturally rich and geographicaly central region of Huế. They also testify to the involvement of the people in an all-embracing system of individual, communal, and cosmic references.

It is intriguing to note that interest in these traditional practices is experiencing a revival, and this at a time when acute cultural and social change is combining with an opening of the country to greater access to the scientific and materialistic modernity of the West.

#### NOTES

\* This research was made possible by a Lavoisier grant from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

1. This is the case in many Asian countries, where the calendar is a complex affair and the days are classified according to how auspicious they are.

2. The word *sampanier* comes from the type of boat known as a *sampan* in Chinese (*sampan* means "three boards," which is what the boats are said to be made of). The *sampaniers* are a Vietnamese population that lives a seminomadic existence on these boats. They are so marginal that a rich body of traditional beliefs has been preserved among them.

3. The Jade Emperor is assisted in this task by the South Star (Nam Taò) and the North Star (Bắc Đẩu), which presides over the destiny of human beings and holds the Emperor's register of fate.

4. The Taoists, for their part, do not acknowledge the *thầy pháp*. According to the priest of the local Taoist temple, "The *thầy pháp* are misguided. They do not maintain tradition and are unaware of the theory behind their practices. Expounding on the Tao is quite difficult since its rules are strict and rigorous. If someone is sick, one must respect the rules of Tao in order to know which illness it is and look it up in the collection of books. To regard the *thầy pháp* as Taoist priests is incorrect. The right titles for Taoist priests are *pháp sư*, or *đạo sư*."

5. The three religions are Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

6. As mentioned by Nicole Louis-Hénard (in PHAN KẾ BÌNH 1980, 2:149).

7. Known in Vietnamese as *sớ*. A placet is a liturgical text written or printed in black ink on a yellow piece of paper and addressed to the representatives of the other world, both as a request and an act of reverence.

8. "We call everyone except those of the *hội đồng*," a *thầy pháp* commented. "When reading the placets we call the spirits and beg them to cure the sick." The *hội đồng* is an ensemble of people of the other world that the mediums refer themselves to.

9. Spirits are said to dwell in the trees.

10. *Ngài* literally means "he." It is a way to refer to the spirit without having to use its name. The designation indicates both the people's respect for and ignorance of this spirit. The mediums always told me that "He" acts as a beneficial being only, perhaps because they are always careful about what they say. The *sampaniers* did not always share this viewpoint.

11. I propose "master servant protector" as a preliminary translation. I have been unable to find the term in the literature available to me.

12. The tiger also has an altar and a statue at the Hòn Chén temple. This temple is dedicated to the Mother of the Sky, who is highly venerated by the mediums.

13. The practice called *lên đồng* (to mount the servants [*đồng*]) exists in other forms that are not systematically therapeutic but comprise a kind of collective seance.

14. I had no chance to meet a *thầy phu thuy* during the time I did the research for this report. People always refused to lead me to the mountains, and I did not insist since such a visit would have been bothersome both for them and for me. Because this part of my research was not officially approved, my information on the *thầy phu thuy* remains somewhat limited and "secondhand."

15. The information about these traditional medical practitioners comes from the academic literature on Sino-Vietnamese medicine published in Europe.

16. During my research I heard no mention of the *thầy tiếp* (master of lethargic sleep). The *thầy tiếp* is a type of hypnotist who in other regions puts subjects into a hypnotic sleep in order to exorcise them. People nonnative to Huế told me that the practice of hypnosis is used as a means to communicate with dead ancestors, who manifest themselves to the hypnotized person and allow him or her to find relief from certain difficulties attributed to the activities of the family dead.

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