

OBSERVING A PANG THEN RITUAL OF THE TÀY PEOPLE IN NORTHERN VIETNAM

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Abstract

This brief paper introduces and discusses the observation of a Then Ritual that is part of the belief system among some Tày People in Lào Cai Province, Vietnam.

Having had the opportunity to observe a very auspicious *Pang Then* ritual, the main parts of the ritual are here briefly described and commented. Some interviews helped find a realistic view on the future of preservation and the way fieldwork can be done that is of the benefit of the people as well as of the researchers.

Keywords

Vietnam, Pang Then, Tày People, Ritual Music, Fieldwork

INTRODUCTION

Vietnam is home to a number of diverse people using different languages, with a varying cultural background, and their specific belief system (Đỗ Thị Hòa 2004). Each of them performs what those people agree upon is traditional culture. The belief culture plays a significant role in those people's life. The term *Then* refers to a ritual closely related to the belief system of the Tày, Nùng, and Thái people who are still living in the mountainous provinces of northern Vietnam.

The *Then* rituals are seemingly indispensable in the spiritual life of the named communities¹ and mark important events of each family. The communities of some Tày, Nùng, and Thái people organize the *Then* rituals based on different purposes, such as praying for good crops, praying for safety, celebrating a newly constructed house, celebrating a wedding, praying for a baby, praying for good health, or praying for a good medical treatment. Each community relies on a *Then* master. *Then* masters are in charge of performing these specific rituals. Some people of the community believe and support this believe with numerous stories that *Then* masters have a special competence to communicate with deities, and, therefore, they can make their prayers come true.

SOME ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND

Despite the *Then* rituals held for the communities, there are also some organized for major events during the learning processes on the way of becoming *Then* masters. For example, a *Then* ritual to officially recognize a person and allow him/her to take up the *Then* profession, or a *Then* ritual to upgrade the level of a *Then* master, and a *Then* ritual held for a *Then* master who wishes to resign because of an advanced age, all these rituals are considered to be high ranking *Then* rituals. These rituals are supposed as great *Then* days and mark very happy days of the entire village. A ritual usually lasts from three to five days with the participation and witness of *Then* practitioners all coming from the community and nearby places.

¹ The communities mentioned are still living quite isolated and in their traditional geographical boundaries. However, it is already an idealizing view since not all young people stay in the villages or small hamlets and take up a profession far from their communities. This paper has to consider these cases, that will be investigated in the near future.

PREPARING THE OBSERVATION

Each *Then* ritual integrates music, dance, fine arts, and language. Thanks to these components, that were already part of earlier studies (Bế Việt Đăng 1992, Norton 2002, Nguyễn Thị Yên 2007, Szymańska-Matusiewicz 2013, Jähnichen 2016) it is easier to understand the outlook on life, to some extent the changing worldview, and the specific aesthetics of some *Tày*, *Nùng*, and *Thái* people in the northern part of Vietnam. Below is a great *Then* ritual – the *Pang Then* ritual (level upgrading) of a young *Then* master. He belongs to the *Tày* people and lives in the district Văn Bàn of Lào Cai province, Vietnam.

THE THEN MASTER

Then Master Chu Hồng Phương was born on 19 July, 1994. In accordance to a ‘*căn số*’ which is a foresight of one’s destiny based on family roots he became a *Then* master in the year 2011. Until 2017, he cured medically 338 children and nearly two thousand people invited him to hold *Then* rituals at their private houses, which was an enormous effort. Through this experience, *Then* Master Chu Hồng Phương reached a certain reputation and was going to organize the *Pang* great ritual, also considered a *Pang Then* ritual. After holding such a ritual, a *Then* Master is believed to have more power, and the number of ghost soldiers and horses will increase to support his professional practice as a *Then* Master.

One day prior to the great *Pang Then* ritual, people set up and decorate the *Xăng bjoóc* tree at the *Then* Master’s home. According to a deeply rooted traditional conception, this tree is to mark, protect, and embrace offerings that link the dead and living beings of the world. Under the tree, people set up their farming products which will be later offered by the *Then* master to the realm of heaven.²

The official ritual takes place during the following three days with support of a invited *Mật* master who has enough power to upgrade the *Then* master’s level. The assistants of the *Mật* master, including a person blowing the *pí* (a free-reed aerophone that is often a byproduct of *khen* making³) and secondly a female, called *Náng Mật*, have to help in the ceremony. Some female assistants are also called Misses *Then*. They dance and play in an ensemble some musical instruments such as the *bằng bu* (a bamboo slab), and a drum.

THE RITUAL

The beginning of the *Pang Then* consists of a series of acts on the first day: *Lễ cúng Thổ công, Thành hoàng làng, gia tiên dòng họ của thầy Then* [the rituals to worship the Local God, the God-like village’s Protector, and the family ancestors of the *Then* master]. Master *Mo*, who was chosen to take over this role, performs these rituals outdoors for the purpose of asking the family’s permission to organize the upgrading *Pang Then* ritual.

The *Pang Then* ritual starts formally with a journey during which the *Then* master and his soldiers bring offerings to the deities in the realm of the Heaven. The path is comprised of sections. It is told by the present community members that, normally, each day is a section of the long road.

Section 1: The *Then* master and soldiers go to meet the representative of the realm of Heaven (Quan Hành khiển), asking for permission to upgrade the *Then* master’s level and to wear a level-upgrading Mandarin dress.

² Similar observations can be made in other contexts within the northern part of Vietnam described by Enders (2008) and by Norton (2002).

³ *Khen* (mouthorgan) playing among some people in the northern part of Vietnam is still quite common. If one of the pipes was not fitting well into a wind chest, then this pipe, called *pí*, is either used as toy or is taken up by a ritual assistant to accompany a ceremonial act.

Section 2: The *Then* master and soldiers go to the realm of Heaven, reporting the progenitor to hold the *Pang Then* ritual.

Section 3: The *Then* master and soldiers go to the realm of Heaven, asking permission of the *Nam Tào* Mandarin, who is in charge of the constellation in the northern hemisphere, to upgrade the professional level of the *Then* master.

Participants of the *Then* ritual together with the *Mật* and the *Then* master also include a group of people dancing specific dances such as *múa khăn*, *múa kiếm*, *múa ma hình* [dancing with handkerchiefs and swords, dancing with the rattle sticks]. These people are also playing the *bằng bu*, and the *đâm đuống*, which is a form of rice pounding within a boat-shaped mortar performed during important festivities. This dancing group, according to the *Then*'s understanding, paves the way for *Then* soldiers to reach their destination in a safe way. After the completion of worship and praying, the *Then* soldiers and villagers start the next part of the festivities. They sing, dance, and drink “tube wine” around the *xăng bjoóc* tree. All people express their great happiness.



Figure 1: An important moment in the ritual process (photo courtesy of Nguyễn Danh Long).

The *Then* Master together with the people dance and perform working processes and games of their daily life as farmers and craftsmen, for example tilling, selling, picking bamboo sprouts, or playing with the *còn*, a specific shuttlecock, which is thrown like a ball and is richly decorated, sphere-shaped, and made from knots of colorful cloths. Next, people take down the trays and bags with offerings, vying for objects hung on the tree, throwing eggs and flowers to each other to try for good fortune. The great *Pang Then* ritual finishes in this way.



Figure 2: The tools of a *Then* Master. (photo courtesy of Nguyễn Danh Long).

In today's practice, people are spontaneously preserving and maintaining the *Then* rituals among their small communities. In order to organize a *Pang Then* ritual successfully as it was observed, neighbors and villagers have to go to the *Then* master's house some months earlier in order to be ready for preparing this special ritual.

The *Then* Master's family pays the total expenses of this ritual including the offerings and the food for the feast that will be consumed by the villagers (in this case, it was around 10,000 USD). The *Then* Master and all villagers are glad to have each other and their festivities, since their community is closer and closer after each time joining a *Then* ritual.

FURTHER FUNCTION OF THE RITUAL

People not only preserve rituals but separate the unique art forms, especially the performing arts, from the conducting of *Then* ritual as part of their belief system. The music and dance are used as a form of entertainment in daily life, it is now called the *Then* singing and the *Tính* lute music. Vietnam organized six national festivals of *Then* singing and *Tính* lute playing in the time period between 2005 and 2018. The festivals included professional and amateur artists, who showcased their skills, and the *Then* Masters. A *Then* singing and *Tính* lute festival is a place for performance of beautiful musical pieces and dances deriving from the *Then* belief ritual. The pieces presented may be rather as used in the communities or adapted arrangements. Additionally, there are new works composed on the basis of some fragments of the *Then* tunes that have also been performed in the festivals.

The 2017 general inventory of *Then* heritage practices in Vietnam lists a total number of *Then* masters: 802 artists (221 male masters and 581 female ones). In Vietnam, 127 groups and clubs with more than three thousand professionals and amateurs know how to perform *Then* singing and *Tính* lute playing. All prove the vitality of this unique art that has its roots in the belief system still practiced among some Tày, Nùng, and Thái communities of Vietnam. Hopefully, the *Then* art of the Tày, Nùng, and Thái ethnic groups will be recognized by UNESCO in their Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritages of Humanity.

However, the main point of the observation undertaken was the fact that this ritual as well as all connected activities are despite all changes and social re-interpretations are alive and spread a big part of happiness among their participants.

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