



## Worshipping Saint Tran - The Blessed Gods' Belief in Vietnamese Culture

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### ABSTRACT

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Blessed gods and the belief in god are unique features in the culture of the Vietnamese community. It can be said that the famous blessed gods are being worshiped all over the territory of Vietnam, such as Hung Vuong (national ancestor), Hai Ba Trung (saint god), Tran Hung Dao (saint god), Lieu Hanh (natural god). In which, worshipping Saint Tran is a form of folk belief in Vietnam, formed through the process of sanctifying and deifying a real historical figure. He became a patron saint for the cause of fighting foreign invaders, protecting the country and helping people to eradicate evil spirits and cure diseases. Within the scope of the article, the author focuses on clarifying the purpose and content of religious activities to worship Saint Tran to show the Vietnamese people's diversity and richness in their culture and beliefs.

### Keywords:

Saint Tran, Tran Hung Dao, belief in blessed gods, culture and beliefs, Vietnam.

### 1. GREAT CONTRIBUTIONS OF TRAN HUNG DAO

Vietnam is a country with 4000 years of civilization history. During the struggle for survival, building and defending the country, the Vietnamese gave birth to many prominent politicians and military and cultural figures who have made great contributions to the nation. Their names are associated with the heroic history pages of the country, such as Hai Bà Trưng, Ngô Quyền, Đinh Bộ Lĩnh, Trần Hưng Đạo (Tran Hung Dao), Lê Lợi, Quang Trung. Among them, Tran Hung Dao (1230 – 1300) emerged as a talented and virtuous character, a great personality, and a military genius. His name was associated with the feat of defeating the Yuan-Mongol invaders as Commander-in-Chief two times in 1285 and 1287-1288. With the victory of the Bạch Đằng river (1288), he was canonized by the people with the respectful name "Saint Tran ."To show his gratitude, later Vietnamese generations called him "Father" (Phan, 1992, p. 22).

Saint Tran's (Tran Hung Dao) real name is Trần Quốc Tuấn, born on December 10, 1230 (there are many documents stating the year of birth is unknown), in Túc Mặc incense, Thiên Trường palace (Pham, 2009). He is the second son of Lord An Sinh (Trần Liễu), nephew of King Trần Thái Tông (1218-1277) – the first king of the Trần Dynasty in Vietnam.

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About the origin of his birth, next to the main line of history written about him is a line of legendary oral histories telling about: Saint Tran was reincarnated by a pupil in Heaven, descended to earth, was born into the Prince's house, then became a primary general, until old age was transformed into a saint to rule the world, eternal descendants were recorded in the merit book. When he was born, it was also the time when the wind blew, giving birth to an aura throughout the house. At dawn the next morning, a Taoist monk came to the door to ask to meet Lord An Sinh; Lord An Sinh said, "Sir came here from afar; I do not know if there is anything wrong, is it"? The Taoist monk replied, "Last night I saw a falling star come here, so today I come to ask to meet and inform the Lord." Lord An Sinh brought the son out for the Taoists to see. After watching, the Taoist knelt, folded his hands, bowed and said to the Lord, "Good thing, this precious son will soon have such economic talents to help the country and save the people." At the age of 12 months, he was already able to speak, at the age of six, he displayed the Bagua map and could read five-word verse poems. Growing up, he became increasingly intelligent, and his father invited famous masters in the country to teach literature and martial arts. Therefore, he was famous as a young scholar who understood a lot, especially in military books, military tactics, horseback riding, and archery [...] (Ho, 2002, p. 232).

In the 5th year of Thien Bao (1283), during the reign of King Trần Nhân Tông (1258-1308), he has conferred the title of Grand Duke, holding the position of Commander-in-Chief to command the military power. With his tactical talent,

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bravery and integrity, he led Đại Việt's<sup>1</sup> army and people to fight and win against the Mongols - the most powerful invading army in the world at that time, maintaining the nation's sovereignty. He is the famous author of the epic poem "Officers' Proclamation" (Hịch tướng sĩ) and two military treatises, "Book of Military Tactics" (Binh thư yếu lược) and " Vạn kiếp Esoteric Book" (Vạn Kiếp tông bí truyền thư). With those two military books, he laid the foundation for Vietnamese military art from the Trần Dynasty to the present day. His prestige also put the Northern enemy in fear. In the literature, the Chinese feudal dynasties also had to be "infamous for him, not daring to call his real name but called Hung Dao Lord" (Nguyen, 2006, p. 45).

Tran Hung Dao left not only illustrious feats in the resistance war against the Mongols but even more, leaving a political-military will that is valuable beyond all historical eras, overcoming time and time. As a historian Ngô Sĩ Liên (1400-1497) in Later Lê dynasty<sup>2</sup> wrote in his book, "Being patient with the people's strength to make a deep and lasting successor, that is a superior strategy to preserve the country" (Ngo, 1971, p. 89). Civil defense is not simply a strategy, but a philosophy that exists for each nation, each country and is the truth of all times. That is the idea of being pro-people, putting people in the highest position in the art of governing the country. That dominant ideology opens the national source and sublimates the Vietnamese people's strength and mettle. Commenting on the national hero Tran Hung Dao, General Vo Nguyen Giap wrote: "Tran's feats of defeating the Mongol-Nguyen empire, his contributions in the field of theory, thought and military art has raised him to the rank of a national hero, a Vietnamese military genius, worthy of a world-class military celebrity" (Ta, 2006, p. 97).

After his death, he was conferred by the court the title of *Thái sư Thượng phụ Thượng Quốc công Nhân vũ Hung Đạo Đại vương* (Hung Dao Great Lord). To commemorate the great merits of Tran Hung Dao, on February 18, 1946, President Ho Chi Minh signed Decree No. 22C NV/CC, regulating Tet days, historical commemorations, and religious ceremonies, the historical anniversary of Tran Hung Dao is the 20th day of the eighth lunar month (the date of his death). Since then, every year's 20th day of the eighth lunar month has become an important holiday in Vietnam. In February 1984, the Royal Society held a meeting with the presence of 478 scientists and military historians of many countries worldwide. The conference nominated a list of 98 excellent generals from ancient times to the present day and then voted to select ten outstanding generals and marshals to print in Encyclopedia Britannica. Of the ten generals, the selected marshal had two Vietnamese (Vũ, 2021), in which Hung Đạo Great Lord Trần Quốc Tuấn in the Middle Ages with the votes of 478/478 reaching 100% (*The man who defeated the strongest enemy in the world - the Mongols at*

*the time* – note further in the vote). It can be said that Tran Hung Dao died to live forever as a historical figure. His mission was to be born as a general to lead the people, help the country, and die as a god to save the people.

With outstanding political and military talents, with a heart of loyalty to the king and country, Tran Hung Dao joined the Trần court and Đại Việt's army and people to protect national independence fully, bringing the Trần Dynasty became the most prosperous dynasty in medieval Vietnamese history. He left valuable historical lessons on building and defending the country. The achievements in martial arts and culture, the material and spiritual values of the Trần Dynasty have glorified the nation's history and are a great pride for our Fatherland" (Vietnam Military History Institute, 2000, p. 116). Bear in the mind of the Vietnamese people, Saint Tran and the Vietnamese ancestors will always be shining examples of personality, morality, bravery, intelligence, energy and talent for the Vietnamese people. Future generations will follow the same emulation of living, working and studying, contributing to enhancing the position, stature and influence of Vietnam in the international arena.

## 2. BELIEF IN WORSHIPING SAINT TRAN OF VIETNAMESE PEOPLE

### 2.1. *The purpose of worshipping Saint Tran*

After the death, Hung Đạo Great Lord Trần Quốc Tuấn was "sanctified" by the people with the respectful name "Saint Tran". This is unique in Vietnamese history because the people canonize a real national hero in history, not a legend. "Saint" is a title reserved only for Hung Dao Great Lord - an outstanding general of the Trần Dynasty.

Like other folk beliefs, the worship of Saint Tran is a form of expression of people's faith and beliefs. The legend of Saint Tran was born based on the need to honor the hero's symbol in the nation's history against foreign invaders. An immortal monument of loyalty and strength to smash all the enemy conspiracies. His name and career live forever in the nation's history and in the subconscious of Vietnamese folklore. The heroic personality of Tran Hung Dao is refracted according to the logic of folk sentimentality, which is not dialectical logic or historical logic but only historical history (folk history) built on the character of real history. Before becoming a saint in the people's hearts, Tran Hung Dao was a talented military commander. Through the admiration in the folk mind, legends about his life fighting against the enemy were widely circulated, becoming a major theme in the folklore treasure. Folk legend has built a majestic image of Saint Tran on horseback chasing enemies, an image of a character who embodies the Holy Spirit with divine magic. Tran Hung Dao "was born in a time of turmoil, grew up in a difficult time"<sup>3</sup>, so he always had a sense of responsibility for the country and nation. He single-mindedly

<sup>1</sup> Đại Việt (1054-1400), the northern Vietnam today

<sup>2</sup> Nhà Hậu Lê (Later Le Dynasty), (1428–1788)

<sup>3</sup> Officers' Proclamation (Hịch tướng sĩ) was wrote in 1284 by Tran Hung Dao

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wanted to protect the country's peace and the people's freedom. His life as an army leader was handed down by the people through legends expressing his earnest desire to drive foreign invaders out of Đại Việt. Through stories handed down in folklore, and historical stories, the people have sent their beloved feelings to build a patriotic character who loves the people. The figure of Tran Hung Dao in the Vietnamese's hearts is not only a talented general but also as close and simple as the father in the family. He took loyalty to the king, used his closeness to treat generals and soldiers, and took care and consideration for the people. He is a shining example of the quality, elegant temperament. These qualities and temperament also contribute to his miraculous feats and the worship that people for generations and all over the country have for him. The legend about him mainly focuses on fighting the enemy to protect the country. Praising his merits, the folk have added sacred and magical elements to the stories of fighting the war, affirming that he is both a human being and a young fairy born with a noble mission to defeat foreign invaders. His career and merits are the cooperation of "Heaven-Earth-Human" power, according to the will of Heaven and the heart of people. Tran Hung Dao was not only helped by the gods, but people everywhere believed in them, from the water saleswoman to the heroic heroes. From a war hero, Hung Dao Great Lord became a Saintly Father with the power to bring peace and protect the people (Ngo, 2019). Many legends are circulated among the people about his divine abilities. He has powers and magic and destroys the wicked (both evil and ghostly). His magic is killing the enemy to save the country, cure the disease and save the people. He has become an ageless person and has been present in the history of the nation's struggle, in today's society, and forever in the future. Therefore, we see that this saint has both human qualities, Buddha qualities, and divine qualities.

The fact that he was "sanctified" is a phenomenon following the minds and wishes of the Vietnamese people: to deify a person with meritorious services to the people and the country, to fight against foreign invaders, to protect the country, and to be praised forever. Vietnamese people did not call him directly by his real name, but Hung Dao Great Lord, Saint Tran, or Father. The worship of Saint Tran has now become a popular folk belief in Vietnam: Saint Tran worshipping. The outstanding value of religion is education on character and morality: "*drink water, remember the source, and remember who planted the tree when eating fruit*"; education, fostering the tradition of patriotism and love for the people; being a model of sacrifice and dedication for the people, for the country; education on the sense of self-reliance, national self-reliance, building a great national unity block.

The worship of Saint Tran has entered the nation's hearts as an immortal symbol of the epic poem about patriotism and nationalism; it is a model of sacrifice and dedication for the people and country. The belief in worshipping Saint Tran is the observance of the law of "birth and vigilance" in Vietnamese culture. Folk Vietnamese historians believe that the belief in worshipping Saint Tran is the impregnating and blending of Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist and indigenous cultures. Imprints of beliefs are left in every architectural detail in stone steles, worshipping statues, and parallel diaphragms, valuable for posterity. That belief also exists through a treasure trove of legends, myths, myths about gods, and folk performances.

*"August for father's death anniversary - March for mother's death anniversary"* has become a Vietnamese folk belief practice. The father here is Tran Hung Dao, and the mother is the holy mother Lieu Hanh, who are sacred figures who have entered the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people many times. Every year, at Kiếp Bạc temple<sup>4</sup>, on the occasion of Tran Hung Dao's death anniversary, the local government and people hold a festival to commemorate his great merits. In the Vietnamese people's minds up to now, the death anniversary of Saint Tran is still considered a solemn day - a festival. People eagerly go to the Tran temple festival from the South to the North. At the special national relic of Tran temple, Phở Minh pagoda, Loc Vuong ward, Nam Dinh city, every year on the occasion of the eighth lunar month, the local government and people solemnly organize the anniversary of Hung Dao Great Lord with many religious rituals such as palanquin procession, sacrifice, literary singing and many other folk games such as dragon dance, lion dance, martial arts performance, wrestling, playing games, chess, cock fighting. Only Saint Tran is a real historical figure among the immortal saints, said to be the most sacred. This can be understood as the admiration and reverence the people have for the hero associated with the glorious feats of the 13th century.

Over 700 years, legends, rituals, and festivals worshipping Saint Tran have formed and developed all over Vietnam. Many popular forms of honoring have created a lasting, enduring vitality and a strong attraction to people. Regarding the worship of Saint Tran, there are not only existing cultural heritages but also a treasure of diverse and colorful intangible cultural heritages imbued with traditional folk art and cultural values. It is a treasure trove of legends, myths and legends about the gods, forms of musical performance, singing, decorative forms, and architecture. The sacrifices and incense offerings in memory of Tran Hung Dao were conducted according to the elaborately built script. They were solemnly and solemnly celebrated with sacred, respectful, and mysterious rituals. In general, most provinces and cities in the

<sup>4</sup> located in Hung Dao Commune, Chi Linh Town, Hai Duong Province, 5km from Con Son Relic Site, and about 80km from Ha Noi.

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country worship Saint Tran in places such as temples, palaces, shrines, communal houses, and pagodas in many forms (i.e., main worship, worshipping or incense procession). In northern Vietnam, the most worshipping place is Nam Dinh province, followed by Thai Binh and Hanoi, and in the southern provinces, although it is less, almost every province and the city has a Saint Tran temple.

### 2.2. Contents of activities belief in worshipping Saint Tran

From a real hero in history, Saint Tran has become a heroic figure in legend and represents the phenomenon of Vietnamese people's belief in god worship. Worshipping Saint Tran's belief has contributed to rich and profound colors in the national cultural and literary life. The author Pham Quynh Phuong, a researcher on the phenomenon of Saint Tran's belief, affirmed: "The belief of Saint Tran is a form of belief in worshipping the blessed god that is related to the worship of evil gods - the remaining imprint of the original beliefs" (Pham, 1998, p. 63) .

Tran Hung Dao became a holy saint from a national hero with many glorious feats. In addition to the special details in the hero's biography that are meant to pave the way into folk life, transforming from a historical hero to a saint took place over many centuries based on specific political, cultural and social conditions. The phenomenon of hero cult with birth in life and temple building after death are primitive forms of religion. After that, the dynasties prayed for help when the country was in danger of invasion, and the people cried out when they were sick, gradually making the religion take on new colors. The belief in Saint Tran is essentially a belief in worshipping the gods. However, at the same time, it is also a complex belief converging many forms of Vietnamese folk belief, such as worshipping the heroic saint (Đạo Thánh), worshipping gods (Đạo Tiên), worshipping ancestors (Đạo Tổ tiên) and worshipping nature gods. From the content and the methods of practicing beliefs, one can see very bold impressions of Taoism. The worship of Saint Tran has a vast scale. The honor and worship of Saint Tran through the system of monuments and festivals is a common phenomenon among folks. The temples, the gods, and the legends have proved that the sanctification of Tran Hung Dao is a spiritual need of the masses. The worship of the hero Tran Hung Dao also originates from the national tradition, which is tradition of "When drinking water, remember the source ."Patriotism, national pride and gratitude for one's roots are prominent aspects of the Vietnamese folk mind. The worship of Saint Tran also has the support of both the government and the people. Saint Tran is worshiped as the main god of a religious line because he meets the simple spiritual needs of the major of people. In addition to praying for seasons, they pray for wealth, fortune, happiness, and peace. It can be said that the religion of Saint Tran met the needs of the Vietnamese feudal dynasty (requiring to affirm the independent will of the nation) and the Vietnamese Confucian class (in the concept

of the genius of the earth spirit) as well as the needs of Vietnamese people (catching evil, exorcisms, and cure diseases). Saint Tran also fulfilled the desire to have a symbol against evil forces; because Saint Tran is a symbol of righteous qi. These needs, both secular and spiritual, hav

The stories with legendary colors related to the Kiếp Bạc temple recorded by historical documents have logic with each other, through which it can be affirmed: "Hero and Deity" (Pham, 2009). In fact, there was a line of belief - worship, that is, worshipping Saint Tran. The sacred space of today's beliefs is no longer in the realm of Kiếp Bạc but has spread to all parts of the country. Although the layers of cultural silt overlap over time, the sacredness of Kiếp Bạc Temple with its good faith in worshipping Saint Tran, along with the historical monument of Côn Sơn Pagoda, will remain forever in the Vietnamese generations' minds.

At present, besides the *hầu đồng*, there are many other forms, such as amulets. After trance rituals, people bring amulets home and put them on the wall or wear them. Some previous forms of exorcism are now lost, such as skewering, tongue slicing, and witchcraft. Those who are sick, especially those who are mentally ill, insane, suspected of being haunted, or suffering from infertility or lifelessness, all come to Kiếp Bạc Temple to pray to Saint Tran. After praying for yin and yang, if possible, go to the place to affix the red bronze stamp on the yellow paper, then go back to the palace and go to the altar of Saint Tran to present. Then they bring the burning paper mixed with wine and water, drain the water to drink, and the ashes are used to rub the temples or rub from the chest down. In addition, the temples of Saint Tran or temples with altars to worship him, also popularized the form of contract sale for children in twelve years. Children who are difficult to raise, people are "sold" to Saint Tran, using his majesty to control all evil spirits, giving the grown-up child obedience and healthy. Some people even changed their children's last names to Trần.

The palaces and shrines of Saint Tran are often magnificent and always bustling with pilgrims. People come to this place as if they were looking for their roots, seeking the protection of special, sacred and reverent affection, helping them dispel their daily hardships, worries, sorrows and misfortunes and towards peace and luck.

## CONCLUSION

The belief in Saint Tran results from the process of deifying a historical figure. Hung Dao Great Lord is eternally praised for his example of loyalty, fortitude, military talent and loyalty. The word sanctified person is a regular phenomenon of the Vietnamese folk mind: the deification of people who have made merits for the country and the people, especially for defending national independence. Considering both the cultural space and the cultural time of the beliefs, it can be seen that this is the most special cultural phenomenon in the history and culture of Vietnam that needs to continue

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to be maintained and developed to enrich the culture and be deeply rooted in the nation's traditional culture.

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