Hakka identity and religious transformation in South Vietnam

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Abstract

Purpose – Most of 823,000 ethnic Chinese people are living in Southern Vietnam among distinct dialectical groups. Each maintains its own pantheon of gods; the majority worships standardized Thien Hau. The Hakka in Buu Long are the only group that worships the craft-master gods. This difference creates a challenging gap between the subgroups and reveals the unorthodox nature of the Hakka’s traditions. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the continuous efforts to achieve “evolving standardization” and solidarity through the charismatic efforts of the local Hakka elites in Buu Long by their liturgical transformation.

Design/methodology/approach – The study further discusses the multilateral interaction and hidden discourses by applying Watson’s (1985) theory of standardization and orthodoxy as well as Weller’s (1987) concept of context-based interpretation.

Findings – Truthfully, when facing pressures, the Hakka in Southern Vietnam decided to transform their non-standard worship of the craft masters into a more integrative model, the Thien Hau cult, by superimposing the new cult on the original platform without significant changes in either belief or liturgical practice. The performance shows to be the so-called “the caterpillar’s spirit under a butterfly’s might” case.

Research limitations/implications – The transformation reveals that the Hakka are currently in their endless struggles for identity and integration, even getting engaged in a pseudo-standardization.

Social implications – This Hakka’s bottom-up evolutionary standardization deserves to be responded academically and practically.

Originality/value – The paper begins with a setting of academic discussions by western writers in this area and then moves on to what makes the practical transformation, how does it happen, and what discourses are hidden underneath.

Keywords Standardization, Integration, Craft-master gods, Hakka, Superimpose, Thien Hau

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Millions of devotees pay a visit to at least 1 of 122 Thien Hau temples in Southern Vietnam yearly, which marks this authorized cult as stable and relatively secure. Thanks to an enriching transformation and state acknowledgement, she has become the most significant icon of the common ethnic Chinese culture in Vietnam, a symbol shared to some extent by both ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese (Nguyễn, 2017).

Thien Hau is a legendary goddess who was originally the shaman woman Lin Moniang (林默娘) in Fujian during the Song Dynasty. Thanks to her legendary power to rescue seafarers, after she died at age 28, she was worshipped as an ordinary sea goddess by local fishermen and devotees. To strengthen centralization in marginal areas such as Fujian and Guangdong, the Song emperor offered her the title of Lady, the Yuan Dynasty upgraded her to Heavenly Concubine, and the Qing Kangxi Emperor sanctioned her as the Heavenly Empress (Liu, 2000, pp. 26-28). The cult followed Chinese merchants and migrants who arrived in Southern Vietnam in the late seventeenth century. The Thien Hau cult in Vietnam has been our research theme during the last decade, from which a book was published in...
This paper goes further with discourse analysis in a detailed case study of the Hakka Chinese in Buu Long area.

The Hakka in Buu Long, which currently has 500 inhabitants, are descended from overseas Chinese groups in Bien Hoa led by Chen Shangchuan (Tran Thuong Xuyen) around the fall of Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga) in the Taiwan Strait. They first resided in Buu Long, where they could maintain their traditional craft production begun in Guangdong. The later Hakka immigrants also found Buu Long to be a safe harbor because their ability to earn a living was secure. We found out during our investigations that the Hakka began worshipping craft gods when the village was first established in the late seventeenth century; however, their temple was renamed the “Thien Hau ancient temple” in the early twentieth century. The Hakka periodically organize a vegetarian festival to “honor Thien Hau” while in fact serving their craft-village’s popular tradition. There is a tremendous difference between belief and practice, between the worship’s hidden significance and its public discourse. This is surely the phenomenon of “the caterpillar’s spirit under a butterfly’s might,” a Vietnamese proverb indicating that the Hakka (the “caterpillar,” the unorthodoxy) are positively taking advantage of renowned Thien Hau (the “butterfly,” the orthodoxy) for their own progressive agenda. What makes the Hakka perform a “disguise” by superimposing Thien Hau on the surface of their original craft-god tradition? How did it take place? Because the disguise reveals the disconnection between holistic belief and liturgical practice, how have the engaged partners reacted over time? The objective of this paper is to analyze the source of the change and the possible mechanism of the liturgical transformation in the local Hakka’s popular tradition, by which the principles and operative tendency of the Hakka’s cultural transformation are demonstrated.

**Standardizing the god and the context-based interpretation of popular tradition**

The Hakka’s transformation is a disparate process that has been widely discussed by many anthropologists. In Sharon Carstens’ study, the Pulai Hakkas in Malaysia are becoming “less conscious” of their Hakka identity; they facilitate a sense of incorporating common Chinese culture within the local context (Carstens, 1996, pp. 124-148). Conversely, the Calcutta Hakkas in India try to maintain their Hakka identity when confronting both non-Hakka Chinese and indigenous communities, thanks to their prosperous economic status (Oxfeld, 1996, pp.149-175). The Kwan Mun Hau Hakka in Hong Kong definitely relinquished their ethnic title “Hakka” after being acknowledged as “indigenous” by the Hong Kong government (Johnson, 1996, pp. 80-97). These three different cases of Hakka conversion and preservation show a common trend, the local adaptation and integration, while the Buu Long Hakka’s liturgical transformation in this study should be defined as both “standardization” and “integration” in feature and goal, respectively. The concept of “standardizing the gods,” defined by Watson (1985, p. 323), is understood in the following way: “[T]he state, aided by a literate elite, sought to bring locals under its influence by co-opting certain popular local deities and guaranteeing that they carried ‘all the right messages[,][…] civilization, order, and loyalty to the state.’” The late imperial Chinese states strongly supported standardized cults and rituals based on the view that ritual orthopraxy could serve as a powerful force for cultural homogenization (von Glahn, 2004, pp. 251-253). While Feuchtwang (1992, pp. 57-58) called this action an “imperial metaphor,” Duara (1988, pp. 778-795) dubbed it “superscription.” As described by Jordan (1972), gods carry both sacred and profane powers; people worship gods because of their holy efficacy and because they are closely connected to bureaucrats in secular life through the titles bestowed by worldly emperors. In the case of Thien Hau, Katz emphasized that “cultural integration in China was attained via the standardization of culture, here defined as the promotion of approved deities like the goddess Tianhou by state authorities and local elites” (Katz, 2007, pp. 71-90).

Claiming to be “orthodox” is a vital part of Chinese popular culture. Rawski (1985) stressed that Chinese culture had become highly integrated because of the efficacy of its prosperity,
educational system and unified writing system. Symbolic practices are a key means of cultural integration, strongly fostered for political purposes by the state and its agents. State-sanctioned symbols “produced a high degree of cultural unity, transcending social differences in mythic interpretation and variant local ritual practice” (Sutton, 2007, p. 5).

However, standardization has been demonstrated as an interactive procedure in which different groups interpret symbols according to their basic understanding and in the way they wish for their own interests. Faure (1999, p. 278) argued that standardization was “a channel whereby knowledge of state practices and institutions entered villages”; elites and religious specialists hold rituals to assert the legitimacy of their own interests, even when confronted with state hegemony.

In its details, the standardization process sometimes takes place under what is called “pseudo-orthopraxy.” Szonyi, in his research on the cult of Five Emperors in the Fuzhou area, called similar disguised transformation “the illusion of standardizing the gods” (Szonyi, 1997, pp. 113-115). Influenced by a strong desire to be standardized under the imperial agenda, five emperors devotees adopted the cult of five manifestations from nearby Jiangxi province; however, local elites stood between local officials and local commoners, they were eager to do the will of the state but in practice covering up local variation and interests. Sutton (2007, p. 9) called these pseudo-orthopractic performers “the Janus-faced local elites”; similarly, Pomeranz (1997, pp. 182-204) praised these elites’ striking roles in mediating the relationship between state and the commoners. Brown (2002) also agreed that local officials and local elites had their own agenda, misleading not only the imperial court but also modern historians.

In sum, in addition to top-down standardization processes, there has always been a bottom-up reaction motivated and implemented mainly by the local elites who hold active power. This phenomenon is sometimes considered a form of mediation of key individuals from one class to another, which helps make Chinese culture “highly integrated.” As a result, at a certain level, standardization means only the written claims – the “cosmetic presentation of community” – with which local elites talk about themselves (Sutton, 2007, p. 10).

Many of the transformations are implemented on the basis of context-based interaction. Weller (1987, pp. 5-7) argued that “much culture […] is neither strongly institutionalized nor strongly ideologized. It exists instead as a process of pragmatic interpretation and reinterpretation.” As he stated, some anthropologists have associated culture with society as a whole, while others have associated culture with groups within society. Different groups have entirely different styles of interpretation, which may change as social conditions change. Weller (1987, p. 167) added that “diverse social relations foster diverse styles of interpretation, and […] all beliefs become open to reinterpretation when the institutions and other social experiences behind them change.” Chinese culture is thus diverse. The state “imposed the structure but not the content” on the symbols and beliefs, thereby allowing different worshippers to construe Tianhou in their own terms (Watson 1985, p. 323). Tu (1994) shared Bakhtin’s concept[1] when calling this “the dialogic imagination,” in which ideas and practices are continually reformulated in argument and reinterpretation. Elites have significant room for creativity in carrying out their own agenda. It is true that the demand to be “recognized” or “authorized” in Chinese popular tradition intertwines with the transformation caused by pragmatic social contexts.

Echoes from the field
At least five dialectic Chinese subgroups are classified in Vietnam, among them the Hakka stand at a low rank in terms of demography (Dao, 1924, p. 47; Tsai, 1968). The Hakka call themselves “người Hế,” meaning the highly cultured people of Hoa Hà (華夏人) (see Chiung, 2013, p. 89). According to a local gazetteer, Gia Định Thành Thông Chí by Trinh Hoài Đác, the Hakka, together with other Chinese subgroups, arrived in Bien Hoa in the late seventeenth century, joined the Chinese town of Cử Lao Phố (大鋪州), erected the...
Quan De (關帝) and Thien Hau (天后) temples (1684) and regularized their business and living affairs. The Hakka, who came almost exclusively from the Huiyang and Dapu prefectures in Guangdong, called themselves the “Sung Chinh.”[2] The Dapu Hakka gradually proceeded to the Mekong River Delta, while the Huiyang Hakka preferred to reside on Buu Long Mountain to maintain their craft profession (Nguyễn 2015, p. 18). They then erected the Master Temple to worship the craft-master gods Lu Ban, Wei Chi Gong and Wu Ding (魯班、尉遲恭、伍丁).

Like other Hoa and Minh Hương[3] during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Hakka became a well-organized “minority elite.” Their craft business gave them relatively high status compared with other subgroups. This statement was asserted many times by Hakka elites during our visits. The historical source of the name “Hakka” (the guests) allowed them to build and maintain a separation between themselves and others, partially thanks to their craft-industry economic status. Their overconfidence drew them into conflicts that sometimes exploded into warfare. The reconciliation among the subgroups’ leaders did not take place as easily as the Hakka wished, partially because of the Hakka’s original overconfidence during the last few centuries and more significantly because of their non-sanctioned craft gods. Finally, there was a vital change in the worship of the Hakka’s gods – an active superimposition of Thien Hau cult on the original platform.

A popular legend has become tightly attached to the annexation of the goddess Thien Hau. As many informants confirmed, a plague hit the region and took some lives in the early twentieth century. There was no effective medical treatment to stop the epidemic; the craft gods too were useless. One mournful morning as the people gathered at the temple to pray, a local man, Su Khoong (曹姜), became abnormal in his gestures and voice, turning his body upside down and walking on two hands straightly to the temple main hall. He claimed to be the incarnation of Thien Hau for an epidemic-controlling mission. He asked Hakka devotees to select 100 types of herbs, categorize them into eight groups and add other herbal materials to make a medical treatment (see also Nguyễn, 2015, p. 18). The Hakka followed his instructions, and thereupon the plague was controlled. The devotees believed strongly in Thien Hau; therefore, they adopted the cult and renamed the temple the “Thien Hau Ancient Temple.” In every three-year cycle, the Hakka organize a vegetarian festival dedicated to her. In fact, as we pointed out after in-depth talks, the legend was gradually composed and added to by the elites in their efforts to institutionalize the gods’ transformation.

The Hakka Vegetarian Festival lasts from the 10th to the 13th of the sixth lunar month in the years of the Tiger, Snake, Monkey and Pig. Ceremonies, as we observed, were held similarly in two recent festivals in 2013 and 2016. The main activities fall into three phases: the preparation period, involving temple decoration and offerings arrangement; invitation; street parades with sacred tigers dance; the agenda announcement; and gods/goddesses gathering pick-ups from nearby areas (days 1 and 2); the core ritual period, involving the main rituals with vegetarian offerings dedicated to all gods; exorcism rituals and universal salvation rites for the dead; and ghost feeding (day 3); and the recovery and ending period, involving the stealing of charitable objects ranged on the bamboo structure[4]; the reverting rite, in which meat-made foods are offered to the gods; returning the gods to their temples; and ending the festival (day 4).

In fact, the main pantheon is always reserved for the original craft gods. Thien Hau and Quan Cong are subordinately annexed to both sides. The temple festival was renamed the Thien Hau Vegetarian Festival; however, Thien Hau is almost entirely excluded from the service. This deserves to be called a “disguised transformation,” which to some extent is associated with the case of the Five Emperors in Szonyi’s (2002) research in Fuzhou. When being asked at first, all the local elites tried to ignore the question; however, after quite a long time making friends and accompanying them to the rituals, they confessed the “disguise.”
Currently, as some elite informants leaked out, there is confusion about the craft gods’ priority, as two conflicting groups of elites are arguing about who is superior in a stone-making village: the wood-carving master Lu Ban, the stone-making Wei Chi Gong or the blacksmithing Wu Ding. The former executive elite group placed Lu Ban in the middle position, while the current elites prioritize Wei Chi Gong. According to our recent discovery, the controversy was caused by the semi-secret relationship between the elite groups and different Taoist specialists (from Hong Kong and Ho Chi Minh City). One active Hakka elite group may venerate a god with the highest respect, while the others disparage him for their own reasons. This striking role in molding gods’ power makes the elites, and not the gods, the main performers of the cults.

**The transformation: “Pseudo-orthopraxy”?**

Standardization in popular tradition is one of the vital features of “Chineseness.” In a non-Chinese state like Vietnam, “being Chinese” among the Hakka, as in other subgroups, is desirable. To take a broad view, “being Chinese” can be defined “idiosyncratically, in contradistinction to the disparaged practices of particular non-Han” (Sutton, 2007, p. 15). According to Sutton (2007, p. 16), a consciousness of Han distinctiveness has long been fostered among the literate through information about “border peoples.” Being called “Hakka” – the guests, and left behind in terms of the economy during post-war periods, the Hakka in Buu Long try to unify with non-Hakka Chinese, and they evince a strong desire to be seen as authentic Chinese elites in term of culture. Literally, this concept of “standardization” is both the Hakka’s self-identification and objective interpretation by non-Hakka elites. We double-checked with non-Hakka representatives in the region, and most of the informants confirmed that the Hakka’s effort was to attain the “orthodoxy” feature. In reality, the claim by the Hakka has been considered stronger than those of other Chinese subgroups, a claim reinforced by the Hakka’s questionable kinship tie with the Singaporean ex-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. During our in-depth research on separate fieldwork trips, seven elderly Hakka elite informants broke into tears because this kinship tie has never been acknowledged. In their stories, Mr. Lee “was born in this Hakka village, he lived there and joined the temple activities. He left when he was eight, for Singapore.” These stories are continually retold by many Hakka elites, although few of them can guide others to what is called “Mr. Lee’s ancestral graveyard.” From the modern anthropological viewpoint, such stories must be further researched, especially considering that immigrant groups may acquire specific symbolic figures to heal their wounds or to fill their emptiness. To some extent, however, such stories deepen the strong desire to be an “authentic Chinese minority elite” among the Hakka for the sake of being easily accepted by the non-Hakka Chinese communities and thus capable of joining cross-dialectic unification.

The previous Minh Hương elite and the current ethnic Chinese in Vietnam have both turned cultural legacies into sources of power after losing their elevated economic status in the mid-twentieth century. Thanks to current “cultural heritage preservation” policies, they take advantage of a “standardized” tradition to build the incorporation of their culture in the country. They have continued to achieve new forms of integration, especially after the Reform of 1986; as Tran (1997, p. 267) concluded, “changes in Vietnam in the last decade have also contributed to the ethnic Chinese being better integrated with the larger Vietnamese community.” According to Choi (2004, p. 38), the local ethnic Chinese have shown their readiness to join Vietnamese society in dress, language and lifestyle throughout history, “yet they still maintained their distinct origin and identity as Chinese.”

However, it seems that each ethnic Chinese subgroup sets up its own route of integration, though cross-dialectic connections may speed up the process. In fact, the Chinese arriving in Vietnam throughout history have been classified into one of five groups named for their native places, each with its own hội quán (會館). The Vietnamese rulers offered them a Hakka identity and religious transformation.
AEDS

relatively high level of autonomy by establishing semi-open ruling policies. Unlike the
Cambodian Kramsrok Act, which required all of the Chinese in the state to join a unique
Chinese association governed by a single Chinese representative (Chau, 1992, p. 66), French
colonists in Vietnam sharpened the divergence by applying the “divide and rule” policy,
which was later continued by the ruler Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon during the 1950–1960s.

As previously mentioned, the boundary between the Hakka and non-Hakka Chinese has
been challenged due to changes in their socio-economic background during the 1900–1930s.
The quietness of the craft business vs the dynamism of other Chinese trading services
pushed the Hakka toward cross-dialectic and cross-ethnic integration. They recognized that
the change could not be successful if their popular cult did not become standardized.
In comparison with the popular Thien Hau and Quan Cong, the craft-master gods had
become unorthodox because neither the Chinese nor Vietnamese emperors had sanctioned
them. While the non-Hakka groups drew on their cultural resources to make an easy shift to
full integration, the Hakka had to make a double change: standardization and integration.

However, the Hakka in Buu Long could not entirely discard the craft-master gods. As most
of my informants indicated, the villagers first disagreed with the change altogether and then
showed only limited acceptance when they learned that the craft gods under the surface of the
goddess Thien Hau were honored even more solemnly than before. Finally, the Hakka elites
became successful in reaching their dual goals. The transformation, described as “crying up
wine and selling vinegar,” took place frequently in imperial China but rarely happened in
Vietnam. The Hakka in Buu Long created a “pseudo-orthopraxy” out of their local popular
tradition, with Thien Hau acting as an innocent performer on the surface while the
craft-village beliefs and original liturgical practices were solemnly implemented underneath.

Why the goddess Thien Hau?
Both Quan Cong and Thien Hau were superimposed on the surface of the Hakka’s older
craft-master worship, but only Thien Hau was announced as the representative of all. What
was the reason for this favoritism? Quan Cong was attached to many anti-French
movements among the local Vietnamese during the late nineteenth and early twentieth
centuries (Nguyễn, 2017), while the ethnic Chinese adopted him as the label of many secret
associations (Tiandihui, for instance). These moves associated Quan Cong closely with the
literate class and meant that his worship was shared by the Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese.
Thien Hau, unlike Quan Cong, widened her symbolic reach by going beyond her status as a
maritime goddess in popular culture: she became the goddess of wealth, the goddess of the
locality, the protector and provider, etc. Thien Hau was thus selected by the Hakka to
reshape cross-dialectic Chinese solidarity.

Weller (1987) emphasized that a context-based interpretation of liturgical practices
throughout history played a vital role in capturing the progressive roadmap of a
community. Due to the pragmatic demands, people manage to adjust their practices to
enhance their lives. Regarding Chinese traditional standardization in Hong Kong, Watson
(1985) emphasized the top-down tendency to conflate local officials and elites with the
dissemination of state-fostered orthodox culture. A case study of the Hakka in Buu Long
shows the opposite feature: standardization from the bottom-up.

As stated by Sapir (1934, p. 205), culture is not something given but something to be
gradually and gropingly discovered by members of a society; it is made by people
experiencing real constraints. There is no permanent set of institutionalized or ideologized
values for all generations; instead, communities continuously modify their values and
generate new ones in their context-based interactions. The modern interpretation of the
Hakka’s liturgical transformation needs to be put into pragmatic contexts at specific
times and places. This is undoubtedly a reinterpretation process. As the superimposition of
Thien Hau over the craft gods was made through changes to ritual practices rather than to
in-depth beliefs, the transformation was not an absolute or systematic conversion. On a certain level, this thin “disguise” allows the Hakka to preserve their corporate culture instead of being fully assimilated into the common Hoa tradition. The term “disguise” is here used in its most positive sense, indicating that someone consciously uses a different outlook or appearance for the sake of attaining progressive goals, rather than meaning a calculated effort to deceive for personal gain. When the doubts and questioning among the Hakka devotees first became serious, the local elites took advantage of the desire for the standardization of the gods and the meeting point of the shared experience[6] during the sacred ritual to overcome the ambiguities. Durkheim (1912) discovered that people shared a potential space of culture created through ritual (seen as both practical knowledge and as profoundly uncertain)[7]. Ritual, defined as “primarily those acts that are formalized through social convention and are repeated over and over in ways that people recognize as somehow the same as before” (Weller, 1987, pp. 7-8), can help human beings to live with, but not abolish, differences and ambiguities. Ritual carries out its effects through repetition, as in periodical rites and other liturgical practices. At the very least, ritual’s repetition creates a shared experience among the participants, which strongly promotes the modification of gods’ symbolic meanings and spreads a shared notation. Accordingly, ritual, notation and shared experience are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, all of them help the Hakka people handle boundaries. Additionally, the story of Thien Hau’s incarnation in a man offering anti-plague medicine also functions as a ritual.

Divergent interpretations of the transformation

In specific contexts, different subjects interpret the Hakka liturgical transformation and the temple’s vegetarian festival differently. Hakka elites are at the center of the transformation. According to Converse (1964, p. 211), elite beliefs are more abstract and more logically coherent than the more context-bound ideas of most people; hence, elites’ ideologies are more objective and logical than commoners’. As demonstrated by Katz (2007, p. 76), elites are more energetic in guiding their community’s interests toward their planned goals of both liturgical standardization and the protection of local diversity. Hakka elites are wisely flexible and actively powerful in asserting the transformation that they conceal with the struggle of both identity and integration, thus making it a well-disguised pseudo-orthopraxy.

As one of the two important stakeholders, local Hakka devotees uneasily but compulsorily follow their elites. In contrast to Wolf’s (1974) statement that there is “a vast gulf between the religion of the elite and that of the peasantry,” Weller (1987, p. 3) affirmed that elite shared with commoners a basic system of religious belief in Heaven, fate and other supernatural concepts (see Yang, 1961, p. 276). Therefore, understanding and sympathy were produced by Hakka devotees a short time after they experienced the change. It seems that when commoners partake of a religious ritual manufactured and guided by their elite leaders, they express dissident ideas only when the issue is incorrect and irrelevant to their lives (see Mann, 1970, pp. 423-439).

In the eyes of the non-Hakka Chinese, the transformation signals at least the Hakka’s humility and unpretentiousness, which deserve sympathy and recognition. Normally, Thien Hau’s birthday festival takes place on the 23rd of the third lunar month, while the Hakka’s festival last from the 10th to the 13th of the sixth lunar month. There is more than one fixed festival season, which brings the devotees closer to Thien Hau and provides opportunities to introduce ethnic Chinese culture. The Thien Hau cult and Vegetarian Festival can, at least, allow Hakka and non-Hakka Chinese and Vietnamese to live together even with ambiguity and a lack of full understanding.

The local Vietnamese have no interest in exploring the Hakka’s transformation and no inspiration to understand the cult, although they may join the festival to acquire the gods’ efficacy and for personal entertainment. In the eyes of the Southern Vietnamese, gods and
goddess all have their own functions, and worshipping as many gods as possible ensures safety. They partake in the festival mainly in the hopes that the goddess Thien Hau, as an incarnation of Guan Yin, will respond to their wishes spiritually. The Hakka elite showed astuteness in creating the story of Thien Hau, the herbal provider, to fit the Vietnamese traditional understanding of Guan Yin. Consistent with Watson’s (1985) finding that commoners “focused on the ritual act no matter what they thought or felt,” local Vietnamese join the ritual for their own experience and based on their own interpretations of the gods or goddesses. If the sacredness of the superimposed Thien Hau goddess is seen as a part of notation, then when it is accompanied by shared experience during the rituals, this notation serves as a significant way of dealing with the gaps between groups and healing any wounds (see Seligman and Weller, 2012, p. 167).

The Hakka’s struggle for identity and cross-boundary integration has intensified under pressure from local authorities throughout history. In late feudal Vietnam, both Hakka and non-Hakka Chinese communities enjoyed a loose economic and socio-cultural autonomy (see Dao, 1924; Chau, 1992; Wheeler, 2015). This priority was challenged and canceled by the French colonists’ policy, more recently followed by the Saigonese Government (1954–1975). The “divide and rule” policy had the effect of separating dialectical Chinese groups into divergent societies. Therefore, the Hakka’s struggle for integration historically caused bitterness in their dealings with the authorities. The post-war period of 1975–1986 also instilled in the Hakka a feeling of deep vulnerability, as they were targeted as capitalists and impotently caught in the middle of the uneasy Sino-Vietnamese bilateral relations, which led to a large-scale ethnic Chinese exodus by ship and boat from Vietnam during the period (see Amer 1991, pp. 126-127). In 1986, Vietnam started its reform policy[8]. Prejudices against religion in general and Chinese popular tradition in particular were largely removed, and the Hakka in Buu Long began their cultural revitalization. The Thien Hau vegetarian festival was periodically reorganized during this reform. The current local authorities acknowledge the liturgical transformation of the Hakka temple; however, they are ignorant of (or may not want to acknowledge) the motivation and significance of it. They appear to be following a “one eye open and one eye closed”[9] policy in dealing with the Hakka in regard to popular beliefs and the Vegetarian Festival. They largely ignore the disguise but want to ensure that the laws are being followed and, more importantly, that the Hakka community is carrying out works of social charity in the name of both Hakka and non-Hakka Chinese.

Aside from the top-ranking Hakka elites, the only parties with doubts about this illogical and unstable superimposition of religious tradition are the Vietnamese intellectuals. They show strong sympathy for the Hakka struggle and understand that the transformation is a historically compulsory choice; however, because no pseudo-orthopraxy can secure the effective and healthy development of a tradition, they request the recuperation of the craft-village legacies, including the ancient cult of the craft gods. Meetings and preliminary talks between top Hakka elites and academicians have recently taken place, and although it is too early to be optimistic, the meetings express a promising hope for the future of Hakka identity and integration. Among the suggestions made has been the revitalization and development of a brand-new postmodernist tourism initiative on the craft-village trail, which has elicited a largely positive response from both Hakka elites and commoners. There is still much room for further research on Hakka heritage and its application to tourism in the specific context of contemporary Vietnam.

Conclusion: from pseudo-orthopraxy to struggle for evolution
The above analysis vividly shows the Hakka’s pseudo-orthopraxy in popular tradition as means of managing conflicting goals, identities and integration. This pseudo-orthopraxy is a non-state and bottom-up approach to standardization implemented by the evolving Hakka community in a non-Chinese society. This split-level discourse creates an illusion of
orthodoxy but is likely to have boundary-crossing effects on a new context-based reinterpretation. The Hakka enjoy a progressive integration because of the transformation, while their craft-village legacies have been protected. The ideologized and pragmatic styles of the interpretation of rituals lie in their relation to their immediate social context, not in their inherent rationality (Weller, 1987, p. 10). Different engaged partners have different interpretations, however, of the repetition of ritual and shared experience during the rituals that brings people together. We should therefore regard the change as generally positive.

Unlike almost all other cases of liturgical standardization among Chinese popular tradition worldwide, the Hakka’s bottom-up approach to standardization in Vietnam strives not only for the feeling of being standardized, but also an evolution. Because ethnic Chinese culture in Vietnam is richly diverse but makes a strong claim to unification, more movements and reforms will take place to eliminate the gaps. However, as there are no logical top-down institutionalized frameworks or criteria to ensure the goals of such movements and reforms, ways of standardizing the gods (or popular traditions) vary widely among the subgroups. The Hakka community in Buu Long compulsorily superimposed the state-sanctioned Thien Hau cult on the worship of its craft-master gods for the sake of evolution, which eventually produced a pseudo-standardization. The standardization of gods, however, is not always a response to pressure from a centralized power. Instead, it should be viewed broadly as the process of empowering the gods of a marginal community to achieve a pragmatic standard status for survival and evolution. Such empowerment of the gods to acquire orthodoxy and cross-boundary unification has marked the standardization and evolution of the Hakka in Buu Long. The Hakka’s liturgical disguise or pseudo-standardization, expressed in the phrase “the caterpillar’s spirit under a butterfly’s might,” has permitted evolution over the past decades and may continue to do so in the future. Cultural standardization, as a means for survival and evolution, has been the goal of an endless struggle among the ethnic Chinese in contemporary Vietnam.

Notes
2. Sung Chinh (崇正), meaning “adoring righteousness.”
3. The common term is used to indicate both the Chinese refugees of Ming dynasty supporters when the Qing took over in seventeenth –eighteenth centuries and the Sino-indigène community composed of Chinese males and local Vietnamese women during different migration waves. This paper applies this term to the latter group, whose language and living style were largely integrated into Vietnamese society while maintaining Chinese patriarchic kinship ties and customs on a certain level (see Chiung, 2013, p. 87; Wheeler, 2015, pp. 141-143).
5. Weller (1987, p. 189) used the term “Hanging up a sheep’s head but selling dog meat” instead.
7. Dewey (1929) divided knowledge into two categories: social (or practical) knowledge and profoundly uncertain.
8. In Vietnamese: Chính sách Đổi mới.
9. Adopted from Weller (1987, p. 188)

References

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Further reading


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