

ANCESTOR WORSHIP, SUPERNATURALISM, AND GIA LONG'S COURT:
LANDSCAPE OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS IN GIA ĐỊNH AT THE
BEGINNING OF THE NGUYỄN DYNASTY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the landscape of religious institutions and practices in the Gia Định region of South Vietnam under Gia Long's reign. First of all, I will introduce the Vietnamese term of phong tục to illustrate why religious practices were secular rather than sacred to Vietnamese people. Then I will discuss the court policies towards religious practices during Nguyễn Ánh's campaign against Tây Sơn rebels during the 1790s to 1802 and its transition after 1802. This not only illustrates how the court utilized the construction of religious institutions to promote political agendas but also demonstrates how a basic Confucian ideology of morality and rites permeated through different levels of Vietnamese society. In the last section, I will argue that under the surface of Confucian influence, both court policies and local religious practices showed trends of religious syncretism.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Yinyin Hu started her study of Vietnamese language and culture at Shanghai International Studies University, where she received her bachelor's degree in the year of 2012. During her junior year in college, she was funded by the Government Exchange Program to study Vietnamese culture at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities – Vietnam National University in Hanoi city, where she further developed her interest in the comparative study of Sino-Vietnamese culture. After graduation, she continued to pursue a master's degree at Cornell University, majoring in Asian Studies with research focus on Vietnamese culture and literature in the 18th and 19th century.

For those who believe in me.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents

<u>INTRODUCTION:.....</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>PHONG TỤC 風俗, RELIGIOUS PRACTICE, AND GIA ĐÌNH : THE SECULAR AS SACRED</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>ENSHRINING LOYAL DEAD AND CULTIVATING LOYALTY FROM 1790 TO 1802</u>	<u>10</u>
<u>ENSHRINING RESPONSIVE DEITIES AND CONFERRING DEITIES AFTER 1802.....</u>	<u>21</u>
<u>LOCAL RELIGIOUS SHRINES: DIVERSITY, SYNCRETISM, AND PRAGMATISM</u>	<u>27</u>
<u>CONCLUSION:.....</u>	<u>35</u>

Introduction:

In the monograph of customs 風俗志 (Phong Tục Chí) section of a local gazetteer of Gia Định 嘉定, the author Trịnh Hoài Đức depicted a region of religious diversity where Buddhism, Shamanism, and abundant female deities were worshiped at the beginning of the 19th century.¹ On the contrary, in the section where religious institutions were mentioned, at least on the surface, most deity shrines except for Buddhist temples were dedicated to deified historical figures including Confucius, and Sea deities. The shrine dedicated to the deity of fire, who was believed to be a female spirit, was the only female deity shrine in the text.² The discrepancy between popular cults and state-sponsored shrines in the religious landscape in Gia Định is depicted in the gazetteer two decades after King Gia Long³ unified the Vietnamese-speaking territories. Gia Định functioned as the base for Gia Long's force when he engaged in a campaign against the Tây Sơn rebel force. How did this influence religious beliefs in the region? In turn, how were religious beliefs utilized by the court to consolidate the newly integrated territories into the state of Vietnam?

Regulations proposed by officials of the Ministry of Rites (Bộ Lễ) 禮部 for official sacrificial ceremonies at Gia Long's court in 1803, a year after the territorial unification, summarized two different court policies towards religious practices during Gia Long's reign. They first suggested that loyal officials should be worshiped in specific shrines according to their deeds. They continued to suggest that the Assembly Shrines should be erected per province and prefecture at their

¹ Gia Định Thông Chí, 173.

² Ibid, 201-227.

³ Nguyễn Ánh reigned as Gia Long in 1802. However, in this paper, the decade when Nguyễn Ánh based on Gia Định and actively fought against Tây Sơn forces would also be discussed as a historical heritage to Gia Long's court. I will refer to him as Nguyễn Ánh before he took the throne.

administrative centers to enshrine responsive deities in the region. ⁴

These two suggestions not only depict the landscape of official religious institutions in Gia Định at the beginning of the Nguyễn dynasty, but they also signal the court's transition from enshrining war dead to enshrining local deities that were miraculous and responsive to people's prayers. Although suggestions were made to enshrine honorable officials according to their deeds, the shrines proposed by the officials were actually all war commemoration shrines near campaign sites. The war against the Tây Sơn rebels that was mainly fought with soldiers, generals, and resources from Gia Định created up a culture of war commemoration in the South during the years of the Nguyễn restoration. Although some local shrines were constructed near the capital city, the purpose of enshrinement was to propitiate the war dead and motivate their soldiers from the South. The practice of war commemoration paralleled ancestor worship because according to the court chronicle, the first Manifest Loyalty shrine was constructed to make sacrifices to the war dead who did not have descendants to offer proper sacrifices to them as a way to reward their loyalty.⁵ The shrine was initially constructed for the court to take the responsibility of their families to offer sacrifices to the dead. More importantly, the initiative of constructing those shrines also contained political agendas, which showed how religious institutions could be utilized by the court to achieve political goals before 1802. The construction of Manifest Loyalty Shrines demonstrated how basic Confucian rites could be utilized by the court to promote political agendas such as manifesting the virtue of the court, cultivating loyalty and integrating new territory.

The second suggestion reflects the dynamic relationship between the court sacrifices and local religious practices in Gia Định after 1802. It also indicates that at least during Gia Long's reign

⁴ Đại Nam Thực Lục Chính Biên 1 (the *Verifiable Records of Đại Nam, First Volume*) 大南實錄正編第一紀, 22:5-6.

⁵ *Ibid*, 5:27.

the court was open to religious diversity. The Hội Đồng official shrine was a religious institution near administrative centers where sacrifices were offered by officials to a collection of local deities that were deemed miraculous and responsive to people's prayers. During the process of enshrining, the potency of a deity was more important than its origin. By constructing local official shrines, the court demonstrated its tendency towards religious syncretism, which was also observed among religious practices of local people. Also, the same sets of ritual were conducted at both these shrines and Manifest Loyalty Shrines, which could also be perceived as the court's assimilation of local deities into the existing official pantheon. Local religious practices also reflected a similar tendency by adopting the rituals of ancestor worship to worship local deities. Thus, the religious landscape in Gia Định indicates that on the one hand some basic Confucian rites permeated through different levels of Vietnamese society while on the other hand, the court as well as the local people were religiously heterogeneous.

Court policies towards religious practice will be discussed in the second and the third section of this paper in detail. Before diving into the discussion of court policies, I will first discuss the conceptualization of religion in Vietnamese society as a background to explain the pragmatic and syncretistic view towards religious practice in Gia Định. In the second section, I will focus on Nguyễn Ánh's initiatives to construct Manifest Loyalty Shrines (Hiển Trung Từ) 顯忠祠 to illustrate how the court utilized the construction of religious institutions to promote political agendas during the years of campaigning against Tây Sơn rebels. In the third part, I will discuss the change in religious policies for the construction of the Assembly Shrines (Miếu Hội Đồng) 會同廟 in 1802 after the territorial unification, which signified the court's openness to religious heterogeneity and the dynamic relationships between local deities and the state pantheon. Finally, I will discuss the diversity of local religious institutions and practices. The case of whale worship

is examined in detail to illustrate how local people absorbed and acculturated new religious beliefs of foreign origin and how basic Confucian rites and ethics permeated through different levels of Vietnamese society.

Overall, religious institutions as well as religious beliefs seldom restrained or constrained both local people and the court. On the contrary, religious rites and religious institutions were employed pragmatically to pursue a better life. Thus, at the court level, the erection of Manifest Loyalty Shrines was mostly done during wartime when loyal soldiers were needed by the court. After the establishment of the new dynasty in 1802, Gia Long's court was rather flexible toward local religious practices and even enshrined local responsive deities in official shrines at administrative centers and in the capital. At the local level, Vietnamese people were not only open to enshrining new deities that were relevant to their daily life, but also would actively absorb and position those deities within their established pantheon to earn more blessings. In the first section, I will start by examining the conceptualization of religion by introducing the Vietnamese term Phong Tục 風俗 (customs) to explain and illustrate Vietnamese people's pragmatic attitude towards religious practices.

Phong Tục 風俗, religious practice, and Gia Đình : The secular as sacred

Religious practices were diffused into Vietnamese people's daily life, yet the conceptualization of religion, which is a modern term related to Christianity, is rather ambiguous in premodern Vietnam. Different Vietnamese terms were and are used as references to religious life in Vietnam: tôn giáo, usually translated as religion; tín ngưỡng, translated as belief; or phong tục and tục, translated as custom or convention. In Kate Jellema's discussion of ancestor worship,

she raised the question whether ancestor worship should be considered as a religion, a belief, an ethic, a national tradition, or mere superstition. However, she circumvented the question by claiming that “although such kind of debate may contribute to analytical clarity, ultimately, the ritual itself, and the burning of incense before the altar would help us to understand the meaning of ancestor veneration for its practitioners.”⁶ But I would suggest that understanding the terminology is an essential part of deciphering the meaning of those rituals and practices. The practice of ancestor worship has manifold meanings and should be examined in the Vietnamese context.

Tôn giáo, the Vietnamese term that is generally translated as religion was first borrowed from Western languages translated into Japanese, from which the Chinese term and the Vietnamese term were later derived.⁷ Before this, phong tục 風俗, a Sino-Vietnamese compound word consisting of two characters phong (wind, air, prevailing atmosphere, aura, mode, style, manners) and tục (customs, usual actions, vogue, secular), was used by scholars to describe customs that included religious practice. Phong is an abstract description of prevailing atmosphere that usually relates to the upper class such as the morals/cultivated manners of scholars 士風, the refined style/mode/manner of writing 文風. Tục refers to customs that sometimes relates to vulgarity such as the customs of barbarians 蠻俗, the customs of rustics 土俗. The phong tục of a region contains different aspects of daily life: clothing, celebration of holidays, rituals of wedding, birth ceremonies, funerals, language and dialects, and so on. This could explain why Olga Dror stated that religious practices were “diffused into all aspects of everyday life and not understood as a

⁶ Kate Jellema, “Everywhere incense burning: remembering ancestors in đổi mới Vietnam” in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 38(3), 467-492.

⁷ Olga Dror, *Cult, Culture, and Authority: Princess Liễu Hạnh in Vietnamese History*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 4.

particular doctrinal or institutional orientation toward the supernatural world”⁸ in Vietnam. After all, the concept of religious practices itself is already intertwined with all aspects of Vietnamese life. A common saying might illuminate southerners’ attitude towards religious practices: “ra đi gặp vịt cũng lùa, gặp duyên cũng kết, gặp chùa cũng tu.”⁹ (When going out, if I see ducks I run after them; if I meet someone, I make their acquaintance; if I passed by a temple, I practice [Buddhism].) That is to say, the practice of Buddhism or any other religious rituals were not different from or more sacred than other aspects of the mundane everyday life.

Although the concept of religion is not fixed, what is clear is that the religious rituals were influenced by basic Confucian ideologies. In Tran Anh’s recently published book, he discussed the religious landscape in pre-19th century North Vietnam under Lê-Trịnh’s rule and how Tam Giáo 三教, the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, were introduced into Vietnamese culture and the role they played in Vietnamese society. He argued that the three religions were blended together without distinction between the three.¹⁰ However, Confucianism was promoted as the ruling ideology during the Lê dynasty. He stated that Confucianism in Vietnam was reduced to a system of family ethics and a code of social conduct. He argued:

Although Confucianism was favored exclusively by the intellectual elite and political rulers, only basic Confucian ideas – mostly in ethics and rituals – reached the masses. In terms of rituals, the vast majority of the population did not understand Confucianism as a cohesive system. Rather, they appropriated fragments of Confucian ethics and supplemented them with

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Nguyễn, Văn Mai, Quang Phát Tạ, and Hào Hùng Nguyễn. *Việt Nam Phong Sứ [The history of atmospheres in Vietnam]*, (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Lao động, 2004).

¹⁰ Anh Q Tran, *Gods, heroes, and ancestors: an interreligious encounter in eighteenth-century Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1-17.

local customs and beliefs. The ruling class adapted to this mentality by appointing a minister of Rites to be in charge of religious affairs and to certify village gods and deified heroes. In this way, they could control local cults and reduce their subversive potential.¹¹

A similar argument could be made about the religious landscape in Gia Định region. I agree with Tran Anh and argue that the practice of ancestor worship in Vietnam represented a reduced and partial form of Confucian ideology and was part of the most basic religious beliefs that gave the form of rituals for Vietnamese people in their religious practice. Incense burning, closely related to the Confucian primogeniture ideology, was part of nearly all religious rituals in Vietnam. Yet, court policies under Gia Long's reign were different from what Tran Anh argued about Lê-Trịnh's. Gia Long's court did not intend to control local religious practices. However, from Gia Long to Minh Mệnh, the second king of the Nguyễn dynasty, the court shifted its focus from martial prowess to civil administration, which manifested traits that would accord with Tran Anh's argument.

Within the limited sources available, I rely on the official chronicle of the Nguyễn dynasty, the *Verifiable Records of Đại Nam* (Đại Nam Thực Lục) 大南實錄 and *Official Compendium of Institutions and Usages of Imperial Vietnam* (Khâm Định Đại Nam Hội Điển Sự Lệ) 欽定大南會典事例 for the court's regulations, discussions, and decrees regarding religious practices. On the other hand, a local gazetteer *Comprehensive Records of Gia Định* (Gia Định Thông Chí) 嘉定通志¹² contains abundant information about the Gia Định region. The gazetteer is not well-studied by researchers in North America. Only excerpts of the text have been translated into English by

¹¹ Ibid, 7.

¹² Trịnh Hoài Đức, "Gia định thông chí" in Dai, Kelai, and Baoyun Yang. *Ling Nan Zhi Guai Deng Shi Liao San Zhong*. (Zhengzhou Shi: Zhongzhou gu ji chu ban she, 1991).

George Dutton.¹³ Gia Định was an administrative unit governing mainly six provinces in the deltaic plain of the Mekong river that were the frontier of the territory of the former Nguyễn state (Đàng Trong) ruled by Gia Long's ancestors for over two hundred years. More importantly, it was the base of Gia Long's force when he was campaigning against Tây Sơn rebels from 1789 to 1802.

The gazetteer includes six sections: Celestial and terrestrial correspondence (星野志); Mountains and Rivers (山川志); Territory (疆域志); Customs (風俗志); Local products (物產志); and Walls and Moats (城池志). Within the section titled *Walls and Moats*, the author listed religious institutions around the administrative centers of each province. For some religious institutions, the author not only described the form of those religious practices, namely the rituals, but also discussed the origin of deities being worshiped. In the meantime, in the Customs section, family rituals, the celebration of holidays, and local religious customs are depicted. Compared to the state-wide gazetteer *Hoàng Việt Nhất Thống Dư Địa Chí* 皇越一統輿地志 (ca. 1805) that was also compiled during Gia Long's reign, *Gia Định Thông Chí* provided detailed descriptions of local life while the state-wide gazetteer described mainly infrastructure such as roads, bridges, rivers, and mountains within each province and the distance between these infrastructures and between provinces.

The compilation of *Gia Định Thông Chí* was initiated by the central court of the new Nguyễn dynasty to collect local information in order to rule a state with a significantly expanded territory compared to the earlier dynasties. Trịnh Hoài Đức, the author of the gazetteer and a local official, stated that “in 1805, [the king ordered] Gia Định to govern Phiên Trấn, Trấn Biên, Vĩnh Trấn, and Hà Tiên [and] to collect information about terrain, local products, [and] to measure the roads and

¹³ George Dutton, “*TRINH HOAI DUC: temple of the general of the southern seas (1820)*,” in Dutton, George Edson., Jayne Susan. Werner, and John K. Whitmore, eds. *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 324.

mountains.”¹⁴ This process was an important way to transmit local information to the central court. It was only three years after the king defeated the Tây Sơn armies, unified the South and the North, and took the throne. The king fixed the capital in the middle part of Vietnam, which is now the city of Huế, where his ancestors had ruled for two centuries and ordered local officials from Gia Định to collect information about the region and to compile local gazetteers.

However, the book titled *Gia Định Thông Chí* was not submitted to the court until Minh Mệnh’s reign. In May 1820, King Minh Mệnh wanted to collect old books, the chronicle stated that,

[The king stated,] “thinking about the kings that [helped this dynasty] to rise, there are historical books during their lifetimes that record their words, works, and political tasks. When King Gia Long established peace, he thought about the past achievements and considered finding the true records but with thousands of tasks to do, he didn’t have time to accomplish it. Officials of historical works are not enough.” Because of the past, the present exists, king Minh Mệnh wanted to make the past clearer, so he asked officials of historical works to compile records. However, at that time, there were not enough books in the royal collection of books, [the king ordered that] “those books that record old stories about previous reigns, no matter short or long, [whoever submits] will be rewarded.”¹⁵

To answer the king’s call, Trịnh Hoài Đức presented *Gia Định Thông Chí* and another book titled *Minh bệ di ngư văn thảo* 明渤遺漁文草, which no longer exists. In this context, we could infer that the gazetteer had not only transmitted local information to the central court but was also used for the compilation of state-wide historical accounts. Although errors and prejudices are

¹⁴ Gia định thông chí, 126.

¹⁵ *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, volume 2, (Việt Nam: Nhà Xuất Bản Giáo Dục, 2004), 62-63.

unavoidable, *Gia Định Thông Chí* as a local gazetteer provides concrete information about local life that is not available elsewhere.¹⁶

I have introduced the role of religious practices in Southerners' daily life and the sources that I will refer to. In the next section, I will discuss how religion as an inseparable part of Vietnamese life could be utilized by the court to promote political agendas. Nguyễn Ánh encouraged and cultivated loyalty by enshrining the war dead during his campaign against the Tây Sơn before the establishment of the Nguyễn dynasty in 1802. The years of war influenced Nguyễn Ánh's attitude towards religious practices. More importantly, Nguyễn Ánh's policies towards rituals and constructions of shrines during wartime illustrated his pragmatic attitude towards religious practices that was continued throughout his reign.

Enshrining loyal dead and cultivating loyalty from 1790 to 1802

When discussing *Manifest Loyalty* shrines 昭忠祠 (Chiêu Trung Từ) built during Qianlong's reign (1711-1799) in Qing China, Tobie Meyer-Fong argued that the "shrine functioned as one of the manifold stages on which the [Qianlong] emperor promoted the military achievements of his era, performed acts of spectacular benevolence, and commanded loyalty from his subjects in return."¹⁷ Nguyễn Ánh's initiatives to construct Manifest Loyalty shrines also reflect similar purposes yet he focused more on the latter two. Moreover, political agendas embedded in the construction of the shrines changed at different stages of the Nguyễn Ánh's war against Tây Sơn.

¹⁶ For limitations on using gazetteer as sources, see Sutton, Donald S. (1979) "The Promise of Social History via the Gazetteers," in *Journal of East Asian Libraries*: Vol. 1979: No. 60, Article 8.

¹⁷ Meyer-Fong, *What Remains*, 139. Also see in James Bonk, "Loyal Souls Come Home: Manifest Loyalty Shrines and the Decentering of War Commemoration in the Qing Empire (1724–1803)," in *Late Imperial China*, Volume 38, (Number 2, December 2017), 61-107.

The construction of Manifest Loyalty shrines exemplifies how religious institutions and Confucian rituals could be utilized by the court to achieve political goals.

Five Manifest Loyalty shrines were constructed after Nguyễn Ánh gained control of Gia Định yet was still struggling with Tây Sơn forces. The first Manifest Loyalty shrine was established in Gia Định to enshrine war dead who fought with Nguyễn Ánh to recover Gia Định before 1789. At the time of construction, this shrine could be considered as a shrine in the capital since Gia Định was the base for Nguyễn Ánh's force. The subsequent four shrines were constructed near campaign sites at Diên Khánh, Bình Định, and Phú Yên, which were later administrated directly by the court in Huế.

That the enshrinement of loyal dead was a way for the king to demonstrate his morality and benevolence indicates that posthumous sacrifice was an important part of Vietnamese imagination of the afterlife. Alexander Woodside argued that the importance of posthumous ceremonies to Vietnamese villagers consolidated family as the basic unit of living. In the 1800's, Vietnamese villagers would erect small open-air shrines called Ashrams for all sentient beings (Am Chúng Sinh) 众生庵 to offer food and sacrifices to homeless souls. Food sacrifice would be offered to homeless souls once a year at the shrine. During the sacrifice, homeless souls would fight with each other for food because this is the only time in a year that their hunger could be satisfied.¹⁸ Thus, in such a schematization of life and afterlife, the king's initiative to erect the Shrine to offer sacrifices to deceased soldiers would ensure that they could at least enjoy satisfactory afterlife unlike those homeless souls. The usage of Am in the title of the shrine implied its relationship with Buddhism, which indicated the shrine's function to propitiate the dead souls. On the contrary, the

¹⁸ Alexander Woodside, "Vietnamese Buddhism, the Vietnamese court, and China in the 1800's," in *Historical Interaction of China and Vietnam: Institutional and Cultural Themes*, ed. Edgar Wickberg (New York: University of Kansas, 1969), 14.

shrines of the war dead were more similar to familial shrines (tù đường) 祠堂 dedicated to ancestor worship as indicated by the usage of tù in the title.

The decree issued to construct the first Manifest Loyalty shrine illustrated this relationship clearly:

Rewarding accomplishment and morality is a common practice from antiquity to now. Manifesting loyalty and encouraging the good is a grand ceremony for a state. Beginning with the Tây Sơn rebellion, our state is in a difficult situation [...] It has been four years. Those who unfortunately died for emperor's task, their achievements have been accredited, awarded, and rewarded. Their families have also been compensated. They resumed normal life and were ordered to offer sacrifice to the dead. [For me,] the only concern is those who do not have descendants. Who could they rely on for incense and fire? If a shrine is not built to enshrine and offer sacrifice to them, how could I console those soldiers from the past and motivate those in the future.¹⁹

Thus, the initial purpose of constructing the first Manifest Loyalty shrine was to enshrine war dead without descendants. Yet, the timing of the decree implies more. According to the gazetteer, the shrine in Phiên An (Gia Định) was finished in 1795. However, the decree to construct the shrine was issued in 1791, after Nguyễn Ánh gained control of Gia Định and a year before he decided to actively raise an army against the Tây Sơn bandits at Quy Nhơn citadel. A year before the order to erect the shrine, Gia Long started the process of recording and rewarding martial accomplishments. He promised that those who were alive would be promoted and those who died

¹⁹ “酬功報德今古之常經顯忠遂良國家之盛典自西山煽亂國步多艱……四載於茲凡不幸死於王事曾已定功褒贈又優給其妻子復其身使之奉祀惟念無後者香火何依苟不為之立祠崇祀何以慰既往而勸將來,” DNTLCB1, 5:27.

would be bestowed with posthumous titles.²⁰ To fulfill his promise, he initiated the construction of the Shrine to enshrine loyal dead who did not have families and thus could not be properly enshrined in a familial shrine. The decree sent his followers an important message that those who were loyal to the king and contributed to the state would be remembered and rewarded. As the last part of the decree stated, the other and more important purpose behind this was to cultivate loyalty and motivate his generals and soldiers.

The second purpose could explain why Nguyễn Ánh repetitively initiated the process of recording and rewarding dead soldiers by enshrining them in the Manifest Loyalty Shrine over the years of war against Tây Sơn. In his second decree to enshrine war dead, he stated it by saying that:

This is a time when officials could establish accomplishments by rescuing the king and fighting against the enemy. Manifesting [achievements] and honoring [the good] is actually a ceremony of rewarding morality for the court. Starting from the Tây Sơn rebellion, our state is in a difficult situation. There were not a few generals and soldiers who sacrificed themselves in service to the state. [Thus,] in the past, we have erected the Manifest Loyalty Shrine.²¹

This decree was issued in the fifth lunar month of 1792, a month before he raised a campaign against Tây Sơn bandits at Quy Nhơn. Yet, his appeal was made within the initiative to enshrine war dead. The Confucian rituals of ancestor worship and enshrining loyal dead were utilized by the king to promote his political agendas. Nguyễn Ánh asked his court officials to collect and verify deeds of soldiers who died in battles from 1773 to 1786 in case some soldiers' contributions had yet to be reported. Nguyễn Ánh claimed that he initiated the process again because the

²⁰ Ibid, 4:27.

²¹ “勤王敵愾乃臣子立功之秋顯號榮名寔朝廷報德之典邈自西山煽亂國步維艱諸將士捐軀報國固不乏人囊者立顯忠祠,” Ibid, 6:4.

information assembled by the court was not comprehensive and it was difficult to examine all the accomplishments of those who participated in the battlefield. He argued that if deceased soldiers were not enshrined in the Manifest Loyalty Shrine, it meant that their loyal souls were disregarded. By issuing a decree to enshrine the war dead, Nguyễn Ánh urged that it was the time for generals and soldiers to contribute to the state and establish achievements. The king's decree responds to doubts and uncertainty raised by a popular literary work titled *Chinh Phụ Ngâm* (*the lament of a soldier's wife*)²² 征婦吟曲 that was composed at around the year 1740, the opening of years of wars and turbulence. In the section titled Afraid of [his] death, the verse reads:

征人貌兮誰丹青
死士魂兮誰哀悼
[...]
功名百忙裏
勞苦未應閒

Who portrayed the soldiers' face?

Who mourned for the dead's soul?

Hundreds of hardships strew the path of fame—

you toil and struggle, never taking rest.²³

This verse was originally composed by Đặng Trần Côn, a Vietnamese Confucian scholar. Historically, the word công danh 功名, which literally means achievement and honor, was perceived as glory earned by passing the imperial examination and being an official.²⁴ The

²² For 征婦吟, I refer to the Chinese version appendix in Đặng, Trần Côn, Huy Ích Phan, and Sanh Thông Huỳnh. *The Song of a Soldier's Wife (Chinh Phụ Ngâm)*. A bilingual ed. (New Haven, CT, USA: Council on Southeast Asia Studies, Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1986), 88-117.

²³ Translated by Sanh Thông Huỳnh in Đặng, Trần Côn, Huy Ích Phan, and Sanh Thông Huỳnh. *The Song of a Soldier's Wife (Chinh Phụ Ngâm)*. A bilingual ed. (New Haven, CT, USA: Council on Southeast Asia Studies, Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1986), 25.

²⁴ Huỳnh, Tịnh Paulus Của. *Dictionnaire Annamite: Đại Nam Quốc Âm Tự Vị* (Gia Định: Văn Hữu, 1974), 186.

fictional narrator in this verse was the wife of a man who abandoned writing brushes and joined the army. These lines indicated that her husband went far away to fight the wars, yet she was afraid that his hard work and sufferings would not be repaid because no one remembered the deeds of soldiers and no one mourned upon their death. Nguyễn Ánh's decree not only indicated that the time of turbulence is a good chance to earn achievements and reputation, but also reassured soldiers that their contribution will be redeemed by the court.

Thus, the purpose for the reassurance was to command loyalty from his generals and officials in return as loyalty was a virtue that highly appreciated by the king. After years of struggling against Tây Sơn forces, Nguyễn Ánh finally settled the war situation in Gia Định in 1789.²⁵ Yet, he still did not recover the whole territory of the Nguyễn state, which included the old capital city of Phú Xuân (modern Huế). More importantly, he was far from defeating Tây Sơn forces since they were still in control of the North and the Center. Also, they were actively attempting to reoccupy Gia Định, which they had succeeded in doing several times in the past. The situation was urgent, yet during the previous years, especially when Tây Sơn was in control of Gia Định, being loyal was not often the first option for generals and soldiers. The instance of enshrining Nguyễn Văn Mỹ in the Shrine during the fall of 1797 illustrates how the king appreciated loyalty despite the fact that the “loyal official” was considered as a villain by others. Nguyễn Văn Mỹ was an official in charge of transporting provisions to frontier areas who died during his mission. Ngô Tùng Chu, a civil official asked the king to revoke his bestowal and argued that as an official, Mỹ was fond of collecting treasures to the point that many ordinary people complained about Mỹ. Chu argued that since the Manifest Loyalty shrine was set up to encourage loyalty, Mỹ should not be enshrined in the shrine as he was a villain. Although the king agreed with Chu's argument, he

²⁵ DNTLCB1, 4:7.

rejected Chu's petition stating that Mỹ's wartime exploits outweighed his other flaws.²⁶ This story suggests that loyalty was a virtue the king highly appreciated and expected during wartime from officials and generals.

For Gia Long's court, those who died in the battlefield with absolute loyalty were role-models for court officials. In 1798, Nguyễn Phúc Cảnh (1780 - 1801), crown prince at the time, suggested that the court should write and compile biographies of the officials enshrined in the Manifest Loyalty Shrine to encourage people's hearts.²⁷ Prince Cảnh's suggestion proved that from the court's view, the deeds of the loyal generals and officials could influence and inspire officials in the court. Moreover, in 1811 Gia Long discussed with court officials those who were loyal with qualities of integrity and righteousness (tiết nghĩa) 節義 from antiquity till their day, and one official said "doesn't every generation have officials who hold on to integrity and die for righteousness? That is because people of high status have encouraged loyalty. In our time, Võ Tánh 武性 (? - 1801) and Ngô Tùng Chu 吳從周 (? - 1801) manifested great integrity that people in olden times also could not exceed."²⁸

Thus, as models of absolute loyalty to the king, Võ Tánh and Ngô Tùng Chu were worshiped at the center of every Manifest Loyalty Shrine after king Gia Long issued an edict to rebuild the shrine in 1804. Also, the court official's statement indicates two things. On the one hand, Võ Tánh and Ngô Tùng Chu were considered as models of loyal officials. On the other hand, loyalty could be cultivated intentionally and their loyalty was encouraged by the king. In this context, a possible interpretation is that the loyalty of Võ Tánh and Ngô Tùng Chu was encouraged by king Gia Long

²⁶ *Preliminary Collection of Ordered Biographies of Đại Nam* (大南正編列傳初集), volume 6, Biographies of officials no. 3, 1084.

²⁷ DNTLCB1, 10:3.

²⁸ “仗節死義之士何代無之顧在上人有以培養之耳本朝如武性吳從周大節凜然古人亦不是過,” Ibid, 42:12.

because he was a benevolent and moral king. This kind of mutual relationship between court officials and the king is also considered as a Confucian ideal.

Later, several shrines similar to the Manifest Loyalty Shrine in Gia Định were ordered to be constructed. These shrines were all constructed near campaign sites yet the timing of construction differs. Thus, different political agendas are embedded within what was earlier discussed. The construction of a local shrine indicates a watershed moment in the process of restoration that the territory was already pacified by the court. In 1797, two years after recovering Diên Khánh, the king ordered the construction of the first local shrine near that campaign site. The erection of Honoring Loyalty Shrine (Tinh Trung Từ) 旌忠祠 was initiated at Diên Khánh to enshrine 250 soldiers who died on the battlefield or from illness during the Diên Khánh campaign of 1795.²⁹

Along with the progress of Nguyễn Ánh's campaign against Tây Sơn, he also utilized enshrinement as a way to appease the people living in newly-integrated territories. In 1799, after the king defeated Tây Sơn at Quy Nhơn citadel and gained control of it. He issued an edict to extend the enshrinement from war dead to local loyal people. He also suggested that local officials should register all the local people who refused to submit to and died fighting against the Tây Sơn bandits during the previous years:

Starting from the time of the Tây Sơn revolt, the name, birthplace, and deed of whoever refused to be soiled by the fake court and extolled the righteousness of the court but was murdered by Tây Sơn forces within the three provinces of Quy Nhơn prefecture should be recorded and sent to the Ministry of Rites. Ngô Tùng Chu would investigate and enlist them in registers of sacrifice (祀典) to console loyal souls. Their descendants should be recruited

²⁹ Ibid, 9:37.

according to their talents. Those who do not have talents should be exempt from corvée. If their farmland was taken, it should also be returned to them.³⁰

This order extended state honors to local common people. In order to have firm control over the territory of Quy Nhon, the king now used the process of enshrining to show people living at the newly-integrated territories that loyalty would be rewarded regardless of one's origin and social status. This was a gesture to show local people that the king is benevolent and their loyalty was valued. More importantly, the usage of "fake court" is a statement to remind the local people that Nguyễn Ánh's court was legitimate. However, no shrine was built to enshrine these loyal souls and no information was given on where these loyal souls were enshrined.

The same strategy was employed when Gia Long finally defeated Tây Sơn rebels and settled the situation in the North. After unifying the Vietnamese territories in 1802, Gia Long issued two decrees to appease officials and people from the North: one to collect information and record the deeds of loyal officials from the north who contributed to the Nguyễn restoration; one to erect the Trịnh family shrine and the Lê family shrine.

The second decree was issued at the time when "the king led his troops to the North and the Trịnh clan was terrified that they would be executed."³¹ Thus, the decrees to reward loyal and righteous officials from the North and to construct familial shrines for the Trịnh clan and the Lê clan was a gesture to appease and show soldiers, officials, and kin- groups of previous ruling families that the king was willing to grant them a comfortable life and would recognize their contributions to the state. Similar to the decree to enshrine local loyalists in Quy Nhon, no specific Manifest Loyalty shrine was built to enshrine loyal dead in the North. As for the Trịnh and Lê

³⁰ "歸仁府轄三縣民凡自離亂以來諸有不肯浼偽為朝廷唱義而為所害者聽所在備列名貫事狀由禮部吳從周覆寔準列祀典以慰忠魂其子隨材錄用不才者復其身田產有為所霸占者竝給還之," Ibid, 10:40-41.

³¹ Ibid, 18:2.

shrines, the heads of the clans were ordered to take the responsibility of sacrificial ceremonies instead of court officials.

Meanwhile, Gia Long also issued one decree to erect three local shrines to honor officials and soldiers killed in the battles of Phú Yên and Bình Định (two provinces in the middle part of Vietnam that were later administered directly by the capital):

From 1799 to 1800 was a time of turbulence. Generals and soldiers followed my lead to Phú Yên and Bình Định. Some sacrificed themselves to defend encircled citadels, others were killed in harsh battlefields. Their righteousness could be compared with deities. The turbulent time was not suitable to manifest [their accomplishments]. Now that the warfare has been settled. [...] Honoring and rewarding is the most important task. [I] command that shrines be erected at these two garrisons to offer sacrifices to war dead. Two shrines should be erected at Bình Định: one inside the citadel in front of Ba Jiao Pavilion to enshrine Võ Tánh, Ngô Tùng Chu, those who were killed inside the citadel, and those who died of illness, which include 260 people in total; one at Mountain Độc in Thi Nại to enshrine 619 people who were killed or died of illness in battles from Quảng Nghệ to Thi Nại led by Võ Di and Túng Nhật Phúc. One shrine to be erected at Cù Mông Nan Dữ in Phú Yên to enshrine 526 soldiers who were killed or died of illness in battles from Thị Dã to Phú Yên led by Mai Đức Nghị.³²

This decree initiated the construction of three local shrines yet also set an end to the ongoing process of erecting Manifest Loyalty shrines during wartime. Along with the pacification of the Vietnamese-speaking territory, King Gia Long secured his throne for the first time. The decree issued immediately after the establishment of the new dynasty signaled that the king would reward

³² “巴未庚申間積歲用兵諸將士等從朕於富安平定或守孤城而殉節或臨堅陣以捐軀一腔義氣可對神明倥傯之秋未遑旌表今戎功大定[.....]崇報最為首務令其二營立廟祀之平定建廟二一在城內八角樓前祀武性吳從周及城內陣亡病故凡二百六十人一在施耐獨山祀武彝魏宋日福及自廣義至施耐陣亡病故凡六百十九人富安建廟於虬蒙巒嶼祀枚德議及自柿野至富安陣亡病故凡五百二十六人,” Ibid, 18:6-10.

any previous and prospective contribution to the state. Meanwhile, there was a discrepancy between the enshrinement of loyal war dead and local loyal people. Shrines were erected for the former and sacrificial ceremonies were conducted by local officials at those shrines while no detailed information was provided about the enshrinement of local loyal people. This was an important gesture for the king to show his officials and generals from the South that the court would remember and reward those who contributed the most to the consolidation of the state.

In the same year, Gia Long ordered to erect an alter at Hà Khê Buddhist temple to make sacrifices to the war dead.³³ Chinese courts had longstanding traditions of entrusting Buddhist monks with the responsibility to propitiate the war dead.³⁴ This is the first time that Buddhist ceremonies were conducted to propitiate the loyal souls during Gia Long's reign. Perhaps, this is the first time when condition permitted such a ceremony. In 1799, Gia Long issued a decree to prohibit the killing of buffalos that were usually offered as sacrifices in religious ceremonies. If there were grand rites that needed to sacrifice buffalo, officials should report to the court in advance.³⁵ Wine- making was also prohibited because of the shortage of rice.³⁶ During a time of material shortage, the enshrinement of war dead was still conducted, which demonstrated the importance of it to Gia Long's court beyond propitiating the dead. Yet, the time to establish achievements and earn glory on the battlefield had passed. From then on, only sporadically were distinguished loyalists enshrined in the central Manifest Loyalty Shrine that was constructed in 1810.³⁷

³³ Ibid, 21:8.

³⁴ James Bonk, "Loyal Souls Come Home: Manifest Loyalty Shrines and the Decentering of War Commemoration in the Qing Empire (1724–1803)," in *Late Imperial China*, Volume 38, (Number 2, December 2017): 61-107.

³⁵ DNTLCB1, 10:19.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Nội các triều Nguyễn, and Viện sử học. *Khâm Định Đại Nam Hội Điển Sự Lệ Biên [Official Directory of Institutions and Regulations of Đại Nam]*. (Huế: Nhà xuất bản Thuận Hóa, 2004. Vol.5), 296-304.

In 1803, the officials of the Ministry of Rites proposed regulations for sacrificial rites offered to war dead. Despite differences of rituals, the officials proposed that the purpose of making sacrifices was the same: to honor morality and reward achievements in order to exhort the following generations of officials. They also proposed that since the Manifest Loyalty Shrine had not been established in the capital, sacrifices should be made at Altar of Immortal Mountain 仙山壇 Tiên Sơn Đàn.³⁸ The officials did not provide details regarding the altar. According to the context, it was probably an altar dedicated to mountain deities erected in the capital. Besides, biannual sacrifices should be offered by officials in Manifest Loyalty shrines in Gia Định, Diên Khánh, Bình Định, and Phú Yên.³⁹ After proposing regulations, the officials then advocated the construction of a syncretistic shrine titled Miếu Hội Đồng, where all responsive deities within the region should be enshrined. Thus, from then on, the court's focus shifted away from the construction of Manifest Loyalty Shrines to the erection of the official Assembly Shrines in different administrative centers to enshrine responsive deities within the region, which will be discussed in the next section.

Enshrining responsive deities and conferring deities after 1802

In the introduction to the Walls and Moats section of the gazetteer, the author stated that “admiring the magnificent buildings of temples and shrines, people should know that the deities [in the region] are eminent and resplendent.”⁴⁰ This is a reason why the religious institutions were included in the section within infrastructure and public spaces along with local administrative

³⁸ DNTLCB, 22:5-6.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ “瞻寺廟之崇隆，而知神靈之赫耀，” Gia Định Thông Chí, 201.

offices, storage house, roads, bridges and markets. Thus, the construction of official religious institutions could also be considered as one of the court duties.

The officials of Ministry of Rites argued that all responsive deities within a region should be worshiped together to show reverence. Otherwise, deities would be affronted. The attempt to enshrine all the responsive deities within a syncretistic shrine could also be considered as a southern heritage. When Nguyễn Hoàng, the first Nguyễn lord, initiated the construction of Thiên Mũ pagoda, he stated that the purpose of it was “to concentrate supernatural influences of the site.”⁴¹ When locals heard of the auspicious and the exceptional, they erected shrines to worship the potent being accordingly at the locality without a system. The officials proposed that Miếu Hội Đồng should be erected so that official sacrifices could be offered biannually to those who should be worshiped systematically.⁴² Thus, instead of controlling local religious shrines, the officials proposed the construction of official shrines to offer sacrifices to diverse local deities. Also, the court tended to worship them within a single shrine.

According to the gazetteer, four out of five provinces in Gia Định constructed Miếu Hội Đồng, with the exception being Định Tường province. The administrative center of Định Tường province was destroyed during the war and people also fled from the region. It was after 1800 that the reconstruction of the city gradually began.⁴³ The war destroyed local economy so that Định Tường province could not afford the material and human inputs required to the construction of temples and shrines right after the end of war. Thus, to some degree, the magnificence of the official shrines

⁴¹ Nola Cooke, “The myth of the restoration: Dang-Trong influences in the spiritual life of the early Nguyễn dynasty (1802-47),” in *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies: Responses to Modernity in the Diverse States of Southeast Asia and Korea, 1750-1900*, ed. Reid, Anthony, (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press LTD, 1997), 284.

⁴² DNTLCB1, 22:6.

⁴³ Gia Định Thông Chí, 222.

at a locality could reflect the prosperity of a region. This could also be a reason why local officials made the effort to construct official shrines.

Besides the construction of official shrines, Gia Long also conferred royal titles on local deities. In 1810, Gia Long issued decrees to designate state deities. When the court officials proposed that new titles should also be bestowed to royal families of previous dynasties, the king refused the proposal and stated that:

Emperors and kings of previous dynasties accomplished achievements and showed morality to their people. Although dynasty has changed, their titles and ranks are fixed. If now titles are to be bestowed again, isn't it also blaspheming? Delivering my decrees to command that villagers respect and make sacrifices like before, only the title of Upper (上), Middle (中), and Lower (下) level for deities should be bestowed in the decrees as [we have] discussed [in court].⁴⁴

Gia Long's refusal to bestow new titles to deceased kings showed his respectfulness to his predecessors, which was also consistent with his attitude towards local religious practices. Gia Long's attitude was the same in 1804 when officials from the North requested decrees to confer local deities. Gia Long asked local officials to investigate memories of spirits (靈蹟) and compile a record of those who had charitable and pious deeds towards local people and were recognized by previous dynasties.⁴⁵ Once again, Gia Long did not attempt to control or change local religious practices. On the contrary, Gia Long respected the religious policies of previous Nguyễn lords. Thus, the designation of deities was a practice inherited from the Nguyễn South. However, Gia

⁴⁴ “歷代帝王昔有功德於民雖朝代變遷而名位已定今若復加褒贈不亦瀆乎其送敕旨令社民奉祀如故惟上中下等神均如議加贈頒給之,” DNTLCB1, 41:9-10.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 23:13.

Long's court ranked deities into the Upper Rank deities (上等神), the Middle Rank deities (中等神), and the Lower Rank deities (下等神). The rubric and purpose of ranking deities is not provided. Yet, the deity ranking system might be considered as an imitation of the ranking system of officials in the court. With ranks bestowed, deities were positioned in the court of deities. This also reflects the court's tendency towards syncretism that could incorporate local deities of different origins into a single state pantheon. More importantly, the southern heritage of Gia Long's court influenced the pool of historical figures to be officially acknowledged and worshiped by subjects of the new dynasty. In other words, historical figures contributed to the Nguyễn state could be worshiped while the worship of officials from the Trịnh North would not be allowed since the Nguyễn dynasty had its origin in the South.

The death sentence of an official for listing a general from the North in the register of sacrifices showed Gia Long's attitude towards the enshrinement of heroes of the Trịnh North. In 1811, two officials from the North were imprisoned because they enshrined Hoàng Ngũ Phúc (1713-1776), a general of the Trịnh regents, who were enemies of the Nguyễn. In 1774, Hoàng Ngũ Phúc led an army to the South and captured the capital of the Nguyễn state, Phú Xuân. Đặng Trần Thường, an official from the North hid the general's identity and listed him in the register of sacrifices. His superior Gia Cát followed Đặng Trần Thường's list and issued a decree to confer Hoàng Ngũ Phúc new honorable titles. After the event was investigated, Gia Long was irritated to the extent that he stated, "if one could bear with this, then what couldn't he bear?"⁴⁶ In the end, Đặng Trần Thường was sentenced to death while Gia Cát was removed from his position. Although the court was open to local religious beliefs, two-hundred years of divergence between the southern region and the

⁴⁶ “此尚可忍孰不可忍,” Ibid, 42:16-17.

northern region determined that the past of certain historical figures had to be rewritten. The heroes of the North had already become evil officials since the new dynasty was founded by a king from the southern region.

On the other hand, the historical figures who contributed to the development of the South were honored and worshiped, which shaped the religious landscape of Gia Định region. Nguyễn Hữu Kính (1650-1700) was a general who contributed to southern territorial expansion. In 1700, he defeated Cambodian troops and captured the land near Rạch Gầm within Mỹ Thọ province. He was ordered to station there in order to arrange the task of reclaiming the land. According to the gazetteer, the night before he died, he dreamed of a deity who tried to persuade him to leave:

That night, he dreamed of a huge person, wearing brocade garments, holding a yellow axe in his hand, his face [looked] like bright red, with white eyebrows. [He] stepped up and said, “General, return as soon as possible. You should not stay long in this evil land.” He woke up and felt downhearted, but because frontier matters hadn’t been clearly arranged, with remaining bandits still fleeing, [he] hesitated and could not decide.⁴⁷

First of all, dreams and prophecies are common ways for encountering spirits in Vietnamese literature. In this case, Kính had the help of a local deity, who advised him to leave. Yet, he could not follow the prophecy because he was loyal to his duty. Thus, Kính was depicted as both loyal and powerful. Several shrines dedicated to Kính were erected in different localities after his death. Local people residing in the region pacified by him even changed the name of this region to Lễ Công Islet (禮公洲) according to his noble rank, marquess Lê Thành (Lê Thành Hầu) 禮成侯, in memory of his contributions to the development of the region. Moreover, shrines were also erected

⁴⁷ “其夜，公夢見偉大一人，身著錦衣，手持黃鉞，面如渥丹，須眉皓白，前而言曰：‘將軍及早還轅，毋得久留惡地。’公醒覺愀然，但以邊事措置未清，餘孽之山林猶竄，躊躇未定。” Gia định thông chí, 224-225.

at places where he fought wars previously and where his coffin was temporarily placed. As a general of great martial power, Kính pacified the region fighting battles with Cambodian enemies. Upon his death, local people believed that he was powerful and could protect the region as a spirit.

Despite the enshrinement of responsive deities and the conferring of titles upon local deities, Gia Long was more concerned about pragmatic aspects of phong tục. In 1802, the king discussed phong tục with his officials and stated that:

The phong tục in the South used to be restrained and moderate, yet since Tây Sơn's rebellious court exalted extravagant and wasteful habits and expended fortune without restraint, people mostly imitated it. This is the root from which the prevailing malpractice is derived from. The system of garment and attire in the North is also not good. [Both] needed a chance of changing and fixing so that the atmosphere will be the same. Yet, the revolution of customs should take place gradually.⁴⁸

Gia Long blamed Tây Sơn forces for the “extravagant and wasteful” customs in the South, which indicated that the customs in the South were originally good and subjects were influenced because the ruling class displayed the wrong model. The logic behind Gia Long's criticism of luxurious lifestyles is actually related to his experience of war, during which he repetitively issued decrees to urge his subjects in Gia Định to pick up plows and be engaged in agricultural work.⁴⁹ In this decree, Gia Long's major concern was still to encourage his subjects to engage in the rice field instead of trading. Moreover, Gia Long advocated the idea of gradual transition. Even though he disapproved of the customs throughout the state, he argued that change should take place gradually. Thus, in a sense, Gia Long's court was more concerned about the stability of the state

⁴⁸ “南河俗本儉約自偽西習尚侈靡用財無節人多效之流弊有由來也北河衣服體制亦不好必須一番改定乃可同風但革俗亦以漸耳,” DNTLCB1, 19:16.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 8:21.

and did not emphasize the control of local religious practices. Then, how would local religious practice be under the religious policies of Gia Long's court? In the next section, I will turn to the discussion of local religious practice by examining whale worship in Gia Định region to argue that besides the syncretistic and pragmatic nature of local religious practice that was similar to that of the court, local religious practice was also influenced by basic Confucian ideologies of rituals and morality.

Local religious shrines: diversity, syncretism, and pragmatism

This section mainly discusses religious diversity among ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese immigrants, who are also subjects of the gazetteer. At the beginning of the Customs section of the gazetteer, the author argued that “Gia Định prefecture of Vietnam is a place with vast territory and abundant food. People don't have the fear of hunger and cold, so they have little savings and are habituated to an excessive and sumptuous lifestyle. People come from four directions to live together in this area, every household practices its own customs.”⁵⁰ Although different ethnic groups lived in Gia Định, I would argue that the author of the gazetteer was mainly concerned with ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese immigrants who had moved to Gia Định decades before. During the process of restoration, Gia Long had the support of various foreign forces such as French missionaries, the king of Siam, Khmer, Cham, and Chinese.⁵¹ Yet, Gia Long thought that people of different ethnicities should not mix and live together. In the gazetteer, ethnic others were mainly mentioned when he described the demography of Gia Định.

⁵⁰ Gia định thông chí, 201.

⁵¹ Choi, Byung Wook, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mạng (1820-1841): Central Policies and Local Response* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2004), 19-43.

Diverse religious institutions were constructed in the Gia Định region. As discussed in the previous section, a significant number of shrines in Gia Định were official shrines including Assembly Shrine, Shrine of Confucius (Văn Miếu), and Manifest Loyalty Shrine. Besides, some shrines were dedicated to historical figures such as Nguyễn Hữu Kính. Sea deities were another group of deities worshiped throughout Gia Định region because of the lifestyles of fishing, maritime trade, and transport by boats in the south. Different sea deities were worshiped in different places by Vietnamese people who hoped that blessings could be granted that would help them in face of difficult situations on water. For example, three shrines dedicated to the Dragon king (Long Vương) 龍王, the Whale deity (Nam Hải tướng quân) 南海將軍, and the Five Dukes (Ngũ công) 五公 were constructed within Biên Hoá province.⁵² The Five Dukes deities were the deities of five dangerous rivers that originally belonged to Cambodia. After Vietnamese inhabited the region, Vietnamese people also worshiped the deities. More importantly, the vernacular ways to address those deities were inherited from Cambodian language without being altered into Vietnamese. Yet, the deity was also officially recognized by Gia Long. The worship of the Five Dukes deities shows how Vietnamese people were open to new religious beliefs. Besides, traits of acculturation were also demonstrated during the process of the Vietnamese adoption of other religious practices.

The practice of whale worship among the Vietnamese fishing population is a typical example that illustrates how Vietnamese people actively absorbed into their existing pantheons deities of foreign origin that they believed were responsive to their prayers and would shelter them from the threatening reality of everyday life. They acculturated the rituals of worship and in a sense, the deity was converted to serve the need of people rather than the people converting to the deity. The

⁵² Gia định thông chí, 218-219.

rituals of whale worship illuminated how the rituals of ancestor worship provided local people with the form of religious practices, which indicated the influence of Confucian ideologies of rituals and ethics. More importantly, the enshrinement of the whale deity in a local official shrine demonstrated the dynamic relationship between local practice and the court pantheon. Among the local deities, those extremely responsive would be selected, enshrined and worshiped by court officials. Annual sacrifices would be conducted by local officials. The erection of those semi-official local religious institutions and the performance of rituals show that the land, people, and most importantly, those who owned all of those are blessed and supported by supernatural beings.

Gia Định Thông Chí might be the first written record of whale worship composed by Vietnamese people. This religious practice is still conducted by fishing populations along the coastal regions of South Vietnam.⁵³ The whale cult is dedicated to Cá Voi (the Vietnamese term for whale which literally means the elephant fish) that is now addressed by modern Vietnamese people respectfully as ông Cá, bà Ngư (Mr Fish and Mrs Fish).⁵⁴ Whether such titles existed during the early nineteenth century is unknown. However, ông Nam Hải, another title that is still used to address the deity was probably more prevalent at the time because Nam Hải, the compound word that referred to sea in the south after the Trịnh-Nguyễn wars, beginning in the early 17th century, was included in the name of most shrines constructed in local fishing villages. The fact that the whale deity was responsive only in the south from Linh River, which is now Gianh River⁵⁵ in Quảng Bình province, the Trịnh-Nguyễn border, to Hà Tiên province on the Gulf of Siam at the

⁵³ For discussions about whale worship in Vietnam, see Nguyễn Thanh Lợi, “Tục thờ cá ông ở Việt Nam [the custom of whale worship in Vietnam]” in *Một góc nhìn về Văn Hoá Biển* [An aspect of maritime culture] (Hochiming City: Nhà Xuất bản tổng hợp thành phố Hồ Chí Minh [Hochiming City General Press]), 209- 250.

⁵⁴ ông is an honorable title for male, while bà is an honorable title for female.

⁵⁵ Gianh River was set as the boundary between the Trịnh North and Nguyễn South. Even though the internal conflicts evolved later since more than two strings of political powers were competing with each other, the dichotomical narrative between North and South was still alive during that time period.

Cambodian border, was emphasized twice in the account.⁵⁶ The author specifically stated that the deity would not manifest its power in areas other than the South Sea. The locality of the deity was emphasized here to indicate that the South was blessed and protected by supernatural power. This illustrates a southern superiority that could be interpreted as the heritage of the Trinh-Nguyen dichotomy. This statement also resonates with a Vietnamese saying -- In the South it is a deity while in the north it is only a kind of fish.⁵⁷ There are also other traces of southern superiority throughout the gazetteer. When describing the customs in the South, the author stated that the Southerners had gotten rid of the uncivil customs of the North and thus behaved like people of a state of civilization.⁵⁸ Even though it is impossible to objectively evaluate his statement was true, the statement itself clearly demonstrated that the author, as a local official in the south, felt superiority in terms of “being civil.”

The practice of whale worship also had pragmatic purposes. Local people sought the whale deity’s protection in relation to both wealth and health. When fishermen spread out fishnets to catch fish, if they called on the deity in prayer, it would cast groups of fish into the net. In this sense, the practice of whale worship could generate economic growth. On the other hand, the author described two scenarios where a whale helped people in danger during journeys at sea. When fishing boats were confronted with the danger of being toppled because of wind and great waves, people often saw a whale hold the boat to keep the boat in balance. Even at times when fishing boats sank and were capsized, the deity could still help people get ashore in the turbulence. The concrete description of those situations embodied the insecurity and vulnerability that fishing populations sought to ease through whale worship. In this sense, the content of whale worship is

⁵⁶ Gia định thông chí, 95-196.

⁵⁷ Tại Nam vi thần, tại Bắc vi ngư.

⁵⁸ Gia định thông chí, 174.

the potency of whales as benevolent and protective spirits in the turbulent and unpredictable sea with the expectation of both material prosperity and personal safety.

From the perspective of Viet practitioners, whale worship represented the acculturation of cults originating in the South and the syncretistic trends of Southern Vietnamese religious practices. The whale deity was originally worshiped by fishing populations of Chams, who inhabited the area before Vietnamese migrants, and of Malays, who constantly travelled to this area through maritime trading routes.⁵⁹ This southern origin of whale worship was emphasized by the author when he stated that the whale spirit was only responsive in the South. To some degree, the south-centered tone reflects the superiority that literati-officials originated from the South possessed and demonstrated during the early Nguyễn dynasty. The adoption of such a southern originated cult by Vietnamese migrants in Gia Định indicated that the lifestyles of fishing and maritime trade were integrated into Vietnamese culture during the process of territorial southward expansion. Moreover, that the ritual of whale worship was similar to the ritual of ancestor worship which indicated that the Viet people did not passively accept it but acculturated it and transformed the rituals of whale worship to a form that was familiar to them.

The personification of the whales is the first aspect of whale worship that relates to ancestor worship. Although the author described the whale as “some kind of creature” that held great power, practitioners of whale worship clearly attached human characteristics to the deity. The gazetteer starts with a brief description of the appearance of the deity emphasizing its size and power, which indicates the potential efficacy of the deity. The deity is a kind of fish without scales. Its head is spherical and smooth with a hole on the top spurting water like rain. It has elephant lips and a

⁵⁹ Nguyen Quoc Thanh, “The whale cult in central Vietnam.” in *Memory and Knowledge of the Sea in Southeast Asia*. Edited by Danny Tze-Ken. Wong. (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Ocean and Earth Sciences, University of Malaya, 2008), 77-94.

shrimp's tail, with a length of 2-to-3 Zhang (丈).⁶⁰ The great power possessed by the deity is emphasized since it could spurt water like rain. The specific usage of the word "rain" may not directly relate to heavenly power but it certainly stresses the potency of the spirit, which also resonates with the emphasis on the large size of the creature. The whale clearly existed in Vietnam during that time. Moreover, whales interacted with fishermen in ways that showed their intelligence and presented characteristics that one would expect from humans. When a whale is caught in the net by accident, fishermen would leave one side of the net open, then call it and guide it to leave through the open end of the net. Additionally, the author used the word benevolent (仁 Nhân), one of the most fundamental Confucian ideals, to describe the virtue of the whale, which means that the nature of whale deity is loving and altruistic. This characteristic of the whale deity explains why the whale would help local people and why local people sought and expected protection from the whale deity.

The ritual of whale worship is also similar to the ceremony of ancestor worship. Blessing from the deity being gained ancestral rituals indicates that the cult was acculturated in the Vietnamese context. The ritual of whale worship consists of two sets of ceremonies. First of all, when local fisherman found the carcass of a dead whale, a funeral would be organized to properly bury the carcass. Secondly, annual or biennial sacrifices are also part of the worshiping rituals after the funeral. The first similarity between the worship of this cult and ancestor worship is that people think dead whales should be properly buried. The deity was from the sea but after death, the carcass had to be buried on earth. More importantly, the rituals of burial that local people would conduct for the deity displayed a simplified version of funeral rituals for ancestor veneration. First of all,

⁶⁰ Zhang is a customary Chinese unit of length, but its value varied over time and usage. For example, during Qing dynasty, the unit length of Zhang for tailor is 3.55 meters while the unit length for construction is 3.2 meters. Thus, the length of whale was around 6 to 12 meters. Gia định thông chí, 219.

preparing for the grave was a part of the burial process. Secondly, people had to prepare a coffin to collect the remains of the dead whale, which was also part of a proper burial. According to the funeral rites of ancestors, the eldest son was to be the master of the burying ceremony, whereas in the case of burying whale, only the head of the local fishing population is eligible to act as the principle mourner for the deity, which is parallel to the familial hierarchy reflected in Confucian ideology. After the funeral, a shrine would be constructed at the side of the deity's grave where sacrifices to the deity would be offered. Wherever a whale was buried, local fishing populations would usually gain great fortune. Seeking blessings from the whale deity, shrines were also established at places along the sea shore where no fish were buried. Fishing populations in Biên Hoà province erected local shrines along seashores titled the Shrine of Southern Sea Admirals 南海將軍祠 (Nam Hải Tương Quân Từ).⁶¹

The people of Gia Định imagined an interaction between their responsive deities and Gia Long, the king from the South. According to the local people near Gò Công, after being defeated by the Tây Sơn uprising, Nguyễn Ánh fled to Siam and then returned to Phú Quốc. On his way to Phú Quốc, he was shipwrecked but a whale brought him ashore safely.⁶² This legend corresponds to the narrative about the potency and responsiveness of the whale spirit. Historically, stories were created about how local spirits offered their service to the monarch in order to show that the new territory was pacified and integrated.⁶³ The story followed the historical pattern. By inventing the

⁶¹ Gia định thông chí, 219.

⁶² The authenticity of the story is hard to verify, but according to Nguyen Quoc Thanh, it is well-known among Vietnamese people.

⁶³ Scholarship about Lý dynasty and its relationship with stories collected in *Departed spirits of Viet Realm* (Việt Điện U Linh Tập) and *Arrayed Tales of Selected Oddities from South of the Passes* (Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái), see Keith W. Taylor, "Authority and Legitimacy in 11th Century Vietnam," in *Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th Centuries*, ed., David G. Marr and A.C. Milner (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; Canberra: Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1986).

story of the king saved by a whale, it indicated that the local spirit that was worshiped by local fishing populations supported Gia Long, the founder of the Nguyễn dynasty.

Vietnamese Buddhists also managed to position the whale deity into their pantheons, which demonstrates the syncretistic trend and flexibility of Vietnamese people in terms of religious beliefs. According to them, the whale deity was originally the kasaya robe (Cà-sa) 袈裟 of Guanyin (Quan Âm) 觀音, the mercy Buddhist bodhisattva. When Guanyin travelled to the South Sea region, she observed that because of poverty, local people had to go out to fish during harsh weather. Sympathizing with local people, she took off her kasaya and threw it into the sea. It immediately transformed into thousands of whales. In the shapes of whale and with the magical power of rapid movement⁶⁴ given by Guanyin, the whale deity is responsible to rescue people that are trapped in storms.⁶⁵ This kind of assimilation process is more commonly seen in the Taoist hierarchy of deities where different deities could be positioned as officials of the Celestial Court ruled by the Jade Emperor.

Besides that, the whale deity was also worshiped in syncretistic shrines erected by the court other than Miếu Hội Đồng. For example, the whale deity and the water spirits of two rivers (Phúc Bình Nhị Giang Hà Bá) 福平二江河伯 were worshiped in the Shrine of Sea Deities in Cần Thơ 芹滌海神廟 (Cần Thơ Hải Thần Miếu) located at Kiên An province.⁶⁶ Local officials were responsible for conducting annual sacrifices to the deities. During the first month in every spring, provincial officials held a ceremony to pray for favorable winds for boats carrying grain to the

⁶⁴ Nguyễn Thanh Lợi mentioned the Vietnamese term of this magical power as phép thu đường, which literally means the magical power of shrinking the roads. I suppose the magical power given by Guanyin is a way to explain why whales could transport people ashore even in harsh storms.

⁶⁵ Nguyễn Thanh Lợi, “Tục thờ cá ông ở Việt Nam [the custom of whale worship in Vietnam]” in Một góc nhìn về Văn Hoá Biển [An aspect of maritime culture] (Hochiminh City: Nhà Xuất bản tổng hợp thành phố Hồ Chí Minh [Hochiminh City General Press]), 209- 250.

⁶⁶ Gia định thông chí, 207.

capital that they could go and come back smoothly. Besides annual official sacrifices, according to the gazetteer, owners of private boats also conducted personal ceremonies. The deity was believed to be so responsive that incense was burned and prayers were transmitted from this world to the other every day.

Thus, these official religious institutions have semi-official functions. As the author indicated in the preface to the institutions section, the construction of deity shrines was a way to demonstrate the other-worldly potency of the locality, which also provided local people with an alternative place to pray for blessings from responsive deities. Also, three sea deities of different origins were enshrined and worshiped officially in the Shrine of Sea Deities in Càn Thơ showed the syncretistic trends of the court regarding religious practices. In the meantime, local people manifested the same tendency since they also conducted private ceremonies in the shrine. The blessings from three different spirits related to rivers and seas granted practitioners blessings that could disperse their fear in their daily life dealing with the capricious sea.

Conclusion:

The religious landscape of the six provinces within Gia Định prefecture at the beginning of the Nguyễn dynasty was shaped by both local religious practices and the court's construction of official shrines. In the first part of the thesis, I suggested that using the Sino-Vietnamese term of *phong tục* instead of modern terminology of religion would explain the secular nature of religious practices in Vietnam. The concept of *phong tục* implies that for Vietnamese people, religious practice is an inseparable aspect of daily life intertwined with clothing, language, writing systems, and the celebrations of holidays. This secular nature of religious practices in Gia Định determined

that people could be open to the absorption of new religious beliefs and position new deities into their existing pantheon for solutions to their immediate life concerns.

More importantly, Gia Long did not seek to control local religious practices in Gia Định. From 1789 to 1802, Gia Long was campaigning against the Tây Sơn rebels to restore the Nguyễn South with Gia Định as the base for his force. According to the chronicle, only after he restored Phú Xuân, the former capital of the Nguyễn South in 1802, did he decide to capture Thăng Long (Hà Nội), the former capital of the Trịnh North.⁶⁷ The southern legacy of the Nguyễn South and the years of war influenced Gia Long's attitude towards religious practice. Following his predecessors who ruled the Nguyễn South, Gia Long easily accepted heterogeneous beliefs⁶⁸ and utilized religious practices pragmatically. During his years of war against the Tây Sơn rebels, Gia Long utilized the construction of Manifest Loyalty Shrines and the enshrinement of loyal officials, local people, and ruling families of the former Trinh North to show his benevolence and merit in order to cultivate loyalty from his followers and appease inhabitants of newly integrated territory beyond his base of Gia Định.

After Gia Long's enthronement, the court shifted its focus to designating state deities. In 1803, Gia Long issued a decree to enshrine deities that should be worshiped, mostly those who were already worshiped by local people and had been officially recognized by previous kings, in regional official shrines at the administrative centers of different provinces.⁶⁹ The construction of Miếu Hội Đồng illustrated how local deities were absorbed into the state pantheon and that all deities could be converted to and positioned within the pantheon. According to Gia Long's policy

⁶⁷ DNTLCB1, 16:3.

⁶⁸ Nola Cooke, "The myth of the restoration: Dang-Trong influences in the spiritual life of the early Nguyễn dynasty (1802-47)," in *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies: Responses to Modernity in the Diverse States of Southeast Asia and Korea, 1750-1900*, ed. Reid, Anthony, (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press LTD, 1997), 269-295.

⁶⁹ DNTLCB1, 22:6.

towards local religious practices, in 1810, decrees to recognize local deities were issued to villagers to encourage them to continue their practices of offering sacrifices.⁷⁰ Yet, the southern origin of Gia Long's court determined that the deified northern historical figures who earned their glory by invading or defeating the South were annulled. For Gia Long's court, worshipping those figures was a crime that would disrespect southern deities.⁷¹ Thus, Gia Long's prohibition of the worship of northern deified heroes was influenced by his origin. By designating local deities with three different ranks, Upper Level, Middle Level, and Lower Level, the Nguyễn court managed to include all local deities that had not even been previously worshiped in official shrines into the state pantheon regardless of their origin as *nhân thần* (deified persons), *nhiên thần* (nature deities), or *thiên thần* (heavenly deities).

Local religious practices in the Gia Định region manifested similar characteristics under Gia Long's reign. From historical figures to miraculous beings such as the fire deity and the water spirit, a diverse range of deities were worshiped by local people. Moreover, the enshrinement of a group of sea deities of various origins also signaled local people's pragmatic view towards religious practices. Through rituals of burning incense and offering sacrifices, people in Gia Định sought blessings from the deities to help them cope with difficult life situations. Thus, living a dangerous life on boats, they sought to ease their anxiety by worshipping sea deities. The similarity between rituals of whale worship and ancestor worship suggested that ancestor worship provided rituals for local religious practices. The employment of the same set of rituals might also imply the influence of basic Confucian ideas on local people since the "filial piety" manifested through wearing mourning for the whale deity would gain blessings for material prosperity and personal wellbeing. Moreover, local religious beliefs could even be integrated into Buddhist beliefs. By

⁷⁰ Ibid, 41:10.

⁷¹ Ibid, 42:17.

inventing the story of Quanyin (Quan Âm) feeling mercy for the struggling fishermen and transforming her kasaya robe (Cà-sa) into the whale deity to save people, Gia Định Buddhists incorporated the whale deity into their pantheon.

By exploring the interrelationship between local religious practices and court policies, I emphasize Gia Long's openness towards diverse religious beliefs and the secular, syncretistic, and pragmatic characteristics of religious practices during his reign. In his book, Alexander Woodside talked about the "Chinese model", which was the influence of Chinese culture and the "Southeast Asian infrastructure", which was the culture that was inherent in the Southeast Asian region.⁷² The religious landscape of Gia Định demonstrated how the basic Confucian ideas of rituals and ethics were absorbed by local people in their religious practices and how the court embraced religious heterogeneity and incorporated local religious beliefs into the state pantheon. On the one hand, Confucian rituals gave form to both the local and the court sacrificial ceremonies in Gia Định during Gia Long's reign. Local religious practices imitated rituals of ancestor worship on the basis that the blessings from the whale deities were gained by preparing proper funerals and organizing annual death ceremonies. Meanwhile, the same sets of rituals were performed in various official shrines including those dedicated to local deities and the Shrine for Confucius. Also, the Confucian ethic of filial piety was demonstrated and emphasized through the practice of ancestor worship, while the Confucian model of benevolent kings and loyal subjects was promoted through enshrining the war dead. On the other hand, by enshrining and designating local deities, the court's pantheon actually included and was shaped by local religious beliefs. Gia Long's court did not seek to control local religious practices. On the contrary, the court actively enshrined and absorbed

⁷² Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: a Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government In the First Half of the Nineteenth Century.* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1988), 7-59.

local deities into the state pantheon to seek the protection and auspiciousness of potent beings that dwelled on the territory of the newly unified state.

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