

Myths and Festivals as Tools for Connecting Traditional Communities: A Research of Newly Urbanized Villages in Ha Noi

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Abstract

In recent years, with the pressure of increasing population, Hanoi had many villages converted to urban areas. In this paper, we choose to study eight newly urbanized villages in South Hanoi which used to belong to a “tổng” – a principal unit of Vietnam during medieval time. In past ten years, together with Hanoi’s urbanization process, these villages have been dispersed into different wards and districts. It is supposed that the sense of belonging to a “tổng” should disappear in the mind of residents of former villages, especially in the mind of younger generations. But in fact, the former villagers and their offspring still keep and strengthen the connection inside the imagined community of eight villages through maintaining the myths of the Water God who had saved the people from the drought. Focusing on how current people recall the myths of Water God and how the festival help to strengthen the sense of belonging of the people, this paper aims to interpret how tradition of rural areas keeps on living in urban spaces of Hanoi.

Keywords: urbanized villages, Hanoi, Vietnam, myth, festival, imagined community

Introduction

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Introduction

Modernization has made many changes to the city Hanoi, a city of 7.588 million people (2015). Many traditional villages have been transferred to urban areas to satisfy the need of the increasing population. In this paper, we study an imagined community of eight villages in southern part of Hanoi, namely Tu Ky, Phap Van, Dai Tu, Linh Dam, Bang A, Bang B, Tuu Liet, Le Xa. These villages are not official governmental units but, as the remnants of agricultural society in the past, still exist in mind of local people. These villages are located in different communes and wards but as they all worship the Water God, Bao Ninh Vuong, the student who made the rain to save the people in a “tong” from a severe drought, they keep a strong connection with each other and perceive themselves as “tam lang bon xa” (eight villages, four communes), the beneficiary of Bao Ninh Vuong’s kindness. The myths of the Water God and the festivals which pay tribute to him really function as the tools for unifying traditional community in the era of urbanization. Approaching the case of these villages, I would want to discuss whether the urbanization process changes the belief of traditional community, and whether the traditional belief of rural community can be mobilized for urban culture development.

1. Big Picture of Urbanization Process in Hanoi

Hanoi has a long history which existed since the medieval time, to the French colony, and now it is a capital city of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. However, the urbanization process has just been

exploded in Hanoi some ten years ago, together with the process of industrialization, modernization and globalization. With the area of 3345km², the city is the living space of 7.588 million people (in 2015). Many people from other parts of the country migrated to Hanoi for working and living, together with high rate of natural increase has risen the demand of house and apartment in the city. Hanoi has open up four border lines (duong vanh dai) along with the urbanization process.



Figure 1. Extension of Hanoi Capital through the four borderlines (Source: Government of Hanoi City)

The cost for land in the first round is rather expensive, so the real estate companies tend to invest in the second or third round. They offer apartments from cheap to high prices for people of different incomes. There was policies to move the factories out of the urban areas of Hanoi to the suburban or nearby provinces. Ha Noi has been extended its territories many times, by merging the districts of the nearby provinces. Eight villages which we choose to study in this research are merged to Hanoi in the first decade of 2000s and they observed a huge change in recent years.

2. Urbanization Process in Eight Villages in the Southern Part of Hanoi

The community which we choose to study includes eight villages in the southern part of Ha Noi. The reason that we choose to study these specific villages is that: In the past, these villages belonged to a tong, an agricultural community. But in recent years, these villages observed rapid changes under the effect of the urbanization process of Hanoi capital. We would want to take these newly urbanized villages as a case to test the effect of urbanization to a specific community, and to see how the people in this location maintain or adapt agricultural tradition in a modern city.

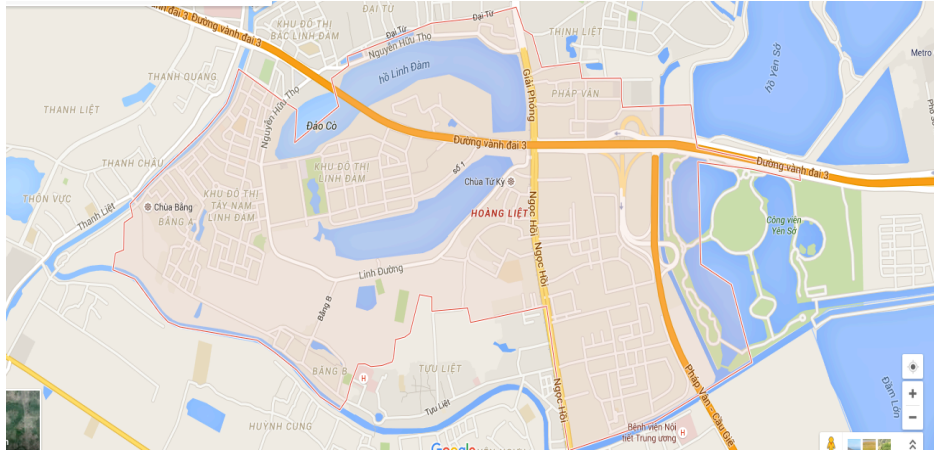


Figure 2. Locations of researched villages (made with Google Maps)

To recall the history of this area, we can say that most of the villages belonged to one “tong”, namely Thanh Liệt (according to documents found at EFEQ library in Hanoi). They were rural villages which were neighbored to the others. They call themselves as the community of “tam lang bon xa” which literarily means “eight villages and four communes” which was saved from a harsh drought by the Water God – the son of Water World’s King. These villages still share the practice of worshipping the Water God, the son of Water World’s king, as they all consider the Water God, who sometimes are referred as Bao Ninh Vuong God, or Linh Lang Dai Vuong, as the spiritual guard for their village (thanh hoang lang). The Water God are revered in the communal houses of each villages. Each year, on the day celebrating the dead of the Water God, the representatives of the former villages go to visit his tomb.

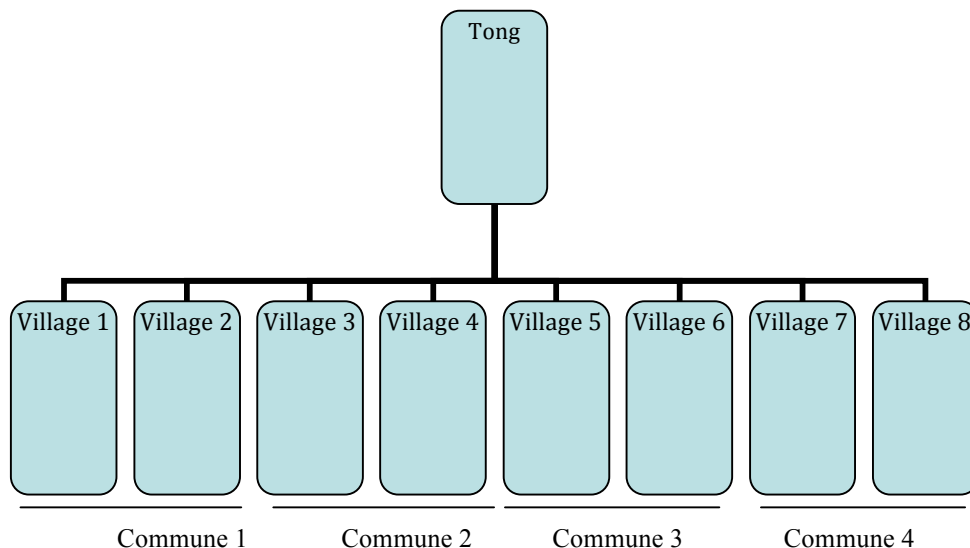


Figure 3. A sample diagram of how a tong worked in medieval time in Vietnam

In early medieval time of Vietnam, “tong” wasn’t an official municipal unit but the voluntary community of the people in the same agricultural areas who wanted to unite in order to deal with matters of irrigation and security. Tong includes some villages in it, but is not as big as phu (districts). Later in medieval period, due to its popularity in the whole country, tong was officially recognized by

feudal government. As for the tong Thanh Liet, by the end of feudal period, this was an officially recognized by Vietnamese feudal governments, but more importantly, it was an imagined community of agricultural community who shared the farming area around the big Linh Dam pond. That community was known of its traditional professions, rice planting and fishing. Since 1946, when the land reform happened in Vietnam, the unit of tong no longer existed. So the official community of tong Thanh Liet have no basis for its existence. And recently, when these villages became part of Hanoi city, the unit of village are omitted from the governmental system. Instead, the population of the whole ward are divided as “groups” (to dan pho), with numbers. The unit “village” now just exists unofficially in the mind of the original residents, and some new residents who understand well about the history of the location.

Nowadays, according to new system of division, most villages located around Linh Dam Pond have been grouped into Hoang Liet Ward, Hoang Mai District (while some parts belong to other wards or communes, for example, former territory of Dai Tu village now belongs to Dai Kim ward). It is said that Hoang Liet ward is one of the most urbanized areas in Hanoi (Vietnamnet). From a rural area in the suburban, Hoang Liet commune had been upgraded to a ward, Hoang Liet ward, in Hoang Mai District of Hanoi in 2003. During the last 13 years, there were many changes in the land use, economy and population of this area. About land use, in the past ten years, Hoang Liet ward’s territory was the location of the agricultural community which had main jobs of cultivating vegetables and fishing. When the area was appended to Hanoi Capital, the land price had been increased. Many locals sold the land for domestic immigrants. Also, many investors built “new urban areas” which attracted a huge number of residents to the area. Different projects of new urban areas have taken place in this ward: Linh Dam Urban Area, VP3, VP6, HH, etc... From an agricultural community of traditional residents, now the area accepted many newcomers. It became a mixed living space of locals and immigrants.

Kieu Trung, Thuy Hanh (2016) reported about the density of people in Hoang Liet ward as follow:

“Before becoming a ward of Hanoi, Hoang Liet was an agricultural commune with 4500 households (nearly 14000 people). But after 5 years being a city’s ward, due to the high increase of the new apartment buildings, the population of the ward has been rapidly increased with about 8500 households, of 32000 people totally (...). Until 2017, it is estimated that this ward will receive 12000 households more and thousands household of the adjacent villas. It is estimated that the population of this area will raise up to 20000 households, with 80000 people”.



Figure 4. Design of the area around Linh Dam pond, Hoang Liet ward (2012).

About the changes of economy, as for the locals, a limited number of farmers keep on their job of farming, while many others who no longer have lands for agricultural works have to change their way of living by participating in industrial and service works. The immigrants who came with New Urban Area Projects contributed to triple Hoang Liet's ward's population but mostly they take this area as a living space while working in the center of the city, mostly in offices and service company. The old and new residents live close by together but are quite lack of connection and interactions. The festivals which tribute to Water God also show case of this loose connection between local and immigrated community, while most of participants in the festivals are original residents of the community, and the newcomers are only the observers of the event.

3. Myths as the Connecting Tool of the Imagined Community

Due to modern system of government, the municipal units of *tong* and *lang* (village) have been eliminated. It is supposed that upon current situation, people of the former villages would lose their sense of belonging to the villages and the *tong*. But actually, through our fieldwork research in 2014 and 2015, we see that original residents in eight villages know quite well the story and often claim themselves as beneficiaries of Water God's kindness in the past. We borrow the term "imagined community" (Benedict Anderson) to refer to the villages which are no longer officially grouped in a "tong" but still perceive themselves as one united entity, even more, as brothers. Or in other words, this is a community which is based merely on a myth. The sense of belonging to the community of the "tong", the agricultural community hasn't disappeared when the territory is joined to Hanoi city.

Bao Ninh Vuong, the Water God is still worshipped in communal houses of all eight villages. We found narrations of the story about this god in the description panel of each communal house and the record of the God which is kept at the communal house. Often, each communal house has its own keepers who represents the village to take care of the god.

To trace back the history of the perception of the community of the *tong* of "tam lang bon xa" (eight villages, four communes), we studied the historical archives of Hanoi and found some insights about the Water God who had strong spiritual influences in the villages in the southern part of Hanoi. The stories are recorded in different forms with different details, but most of them include the core content as follow: there was the son of the king of the water world, who we call Water God, who admired the talent and moral of Master Chu Van An, and disguised himself as a man to follow Chu Van An's class. That year, there was a severe drought and all the rice fields had no waters. The Master asked the student, Water God to help the people. With the love for the people, the Water God decided to use a pen to spread the ink to the sky, then he could make the rain and save the crops for the people. He then was punished by the sky and his head was cut of his body. His head floated to the place which is now Cau Buou (Buou bridge). His pen and ink was thrown to different villages in the community of eight villages, four communes. Lê Trung Vũ, Nguyễn Thị Hồng Hạnh (2001), in the book *Lễ hội Thăng Long* [Thăng Long's festivals] have insisted that the limited ink from the ink pot that the Water God used just could make enough rain for a "tông". Văn Quảng (2009) in the book *Văn hóa tâm linh Thăng Long Hà Nội* [Spiritual culture of Thăng Long Hà Nội] added the details that "after the dead of Water God, people of seven villages pay the tribute to him by organizing festivals in February each year (in lunar calendar). In these festivals, they offer the Water God the carps caught from the Linh Dam pond to remind of his sacrifice for the community in the past". Attending the festival in the year 2015, I saw that people from the community offered the carps in the festivals which celebrate the kindness of the Water God. So it is clear that people in the community of eight villages have transferred the memory of the Water God from the past to the present. The myth of the Water God is still believed by many people in the community.

4. Festivals as the Major Periods for Reviving Community Spirit

As the Water God in the aforementioned myths are believed to be the guard of the villages, he is worshipped by the villagers in everyday practice and in the festivals.

Each village has one man (bô, a senior who is more than 50 years old) to keep the communal house. This man represents the village to take care of worshipping the Water God every day. He makes the pray every morning with the content dedicated to Water God and asks the god to bring happiness and prosperity to the villagers. He takes care of items that are believed to be sacred things that the Water God left behind before his death. The people in the villages also express their belief by praying to the Water God to offer them lucks and happiness. So, even when the villages have been changed, the people in the former community of Tong Quang Liet still keep their memory of the Water God.

The evidence of the existence of the belief of the people in the community of former villages of Tong Quang Liet of the Water God is shown clearly in the festivals of each village which are held twice each year and the festivals of the whole community which are held every five years in the spring. We will discuss more about the community festival which is held every five years, with the participation of people from the eight villages. It is notable that though the former community of Tong Quang Liet is now just an imagined community, the government still “legitimizes” it by sending the officers to the community to help with the organization of the festivals. The organizers of the community festivals are: People’s Committee, People Council, Communist Party Representatives of Hoang Liet Ward; representative groups of people of the villages. Local people in the villages often prepare and run the festivals; while newcomers mostly observe the event only. There are different generations joining in the community festivals. To make the festivals, there were both community’s voluntary contribution and the financial support from the government. In the community festivals, people practiced the worship to the Water God, such as: they devoted the fish palanquin, the local specialty palanquins to the Water God; they take water from the main temple (Mieu Gan) to the communal houses in each village; they play music and dance to entertain the god, etc. In the community festival in 2015, the representative of the local government read the myth of Water God to recall the memory of the whole community of the benevolence of the God. So the festivals help to reunite the people of the former community, even when that community has been disappeared from the official governmental system.

Conclusion

Through studying the myth and festival relating to the Water God in eight village of the ancient community in southern Ha Noi, we see that the imagined community based on myths still has its reason to exist in modern society. Myths and festivals have great role in consolidating the traditional community. The myths help recall the pride of the tradition and the festivals help to unite people in common activities. It is notable that agricultural community continue its value in urban setting. The administration of the government sometimes has to adapt with the demand of traditional communities to support the community spirit. A lesson learnt is that developing the urban area but with respect to local tradition, rural tradition. In the future, the local government should take advantage of the local tradition to make tourism destination and they should make the festival with the participation of traditional residents and new residents.

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