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The Substance and Style of *Len Dong*: Healing, Transformation, and Aesthetic in Spirit Possession Rituals of Hue

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Special Thanks:

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Thu Anh and Family
Thi and Family
Mr. Hien
Ms. Hong
Master Tri

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Yvonne Chireau
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A Special Note:

Translation assistance, scheduling interviews, and motorbike rides to meetings makes up but half of the experience; drinking coffee by the riverside, attending the wedding ceremony of a good friend, and singing at karaoke lounges in the afternoon is the other half—But bridging cultures, forging new relationships, new understandings, and discovering each other’s identity is the greater context in which this research was conducted. I am grateful for the time spent with the interviewees and their families, and thank them for inviting me into their lives, their homes, and making me feel welcome.

I appreciate the willingness of the interviewees to share their stories with me, their opinions, their thoughts, and their fears. I hope I presented the forthcoming narratives in a contemplative and insightful manner. I arranged the narratives to the best of my ability, attempting to let the interviewees’ words speak to the reader without much of my interference. The provided commentary and analysis is simply there to place each story in the appropriate context, with reference to some of the theories of the function of religious rituals in the lives of individuals.

Popular religion is a powerful force in the world. It is created by people, lived by people, embodied by people—in the most brilliant of ways. Visually stunning, commercially thriving, and ever-changing—popular religion uniquely expresses diversity across intersecting factors of race and ethnicity; nationality; sex and gender; class and privilege. I hope that this research piques the curiosity of others, at the same time, brings another level of understanding to the controversial act of spirit possession in Vietnam.
The Substance and Style of *Len Dong*: Healing, Transformation, and Aesthetic in Spirit Possession

**Rituals of Hue**

**Introduction:**

*Len Dong* is a spirit possession ritual practiced in the mother goddess religion of *Tu Phu*. *Tu Phu* roughly translates to “Four Palaces” or the sacred homes of the four spirits of the earth, heaven, water, and mountain or woods. As there is no formal organization of the religion, there is much freedom in its expression among practitioners. For example, the styles, designs, and intricacy of the costumes may vary, or perhaps the size of the accompanying ritual orchestra. Yet there remains one very important element of spirit possession ritual: *loc* or lucky gifts from the spirits of the mother goddess pantheon.

The gifts themselves are of among the two categories of tangible and intangible. Tangible gifts include lucky money, votive paper, fruit, food, stones, amulets, and other items that may have been imbued with the favor of the spirits. The intangible gifts, though, are some of the most interesting—and will be the topic that this paper will seek to explore.

Practitioners of *len dong* speak of increased mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical health, in addition to financial opportunities. Kirsten W. Endres explores the construction of personal identity through the practice of spirit possession in the way it manifests itself in the pattern of events that lead an individual toward becoming a medium. In two interviews that Endres relates, both Ms. Huong and Ms. Hang mention experiencing reoccurring hardship related to health, physical ability, and money. In both cases, it is advised that the two women become initiated as mediums in *Tu Phu*.

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1 Introduction. Possessed by the Spirits: Mediumship in Contemporary Vietnamese Communities. P. 7
2 Not to be mistaken with interview alias “Ms. Hong” used later in this paper.
After initiation, making prayers to the spirits, and performing *len dong* ceremonies, both women profess a noticeable change in their lives.

The research of Karen Fjelstand and Lisa Maiffret also explores the transformations of lives through spirit possession. Their focus, in the essay “Gifts from the Spirits”, is on the function of spirits to teach lessons and to guide individuals through their daily lives\(^3\). Their focus on the functionality of religion, of its usefulness and the ways in which it is utilized, is helpful in assessing spirit possession—in defining what it is, what it is not; what it was and what it has potential to be.

To further aid my research, I seek help from Endres’ understanding of Catharine Bell and Victor Turner’s theories of ritual performance and social action. Through Bell and Turner, Endres develops a framework with which to look at spirit possession rituals as a means of reproducing and reshaping lives in a Vietnamese social and cultural environment\(^4\). Phillip Taylor speaks to this theory in his research of mother goddess religions, as he is especially concerned with the post-Doi Moi proliferation of popular religion such as *len dong* spirit possession as a way of making sense of a capitalist oriented economy in the age of globalization, modernization, and development.

For Taylor, ritual practices of the mother goddess religions are a powerful way for the marginalized to gain respect, status, and a sense of control over one’s day-to-day lived experience. Taylor explores *len dong* as a means of fostering financial security and independence among women in Southern and Northern Vietnam, and takes keen interest in Ba Chu Xu, the Lady of the Realm, near the Vietnam-Cambodian border in the Mekong Delta.

The above intangible benefits of empowerment in the areas of finance, physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional health through the practice of *len dong* lend the ritual much significance in

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\(^3\) Fjelstad, Karen. Maiffret, Lisa. “Gifts from the Spirits”. P.121

the lives of its practitioners. However, along with significance comes the question of authenticity.

What is legitimate len dong? The question of authenticity I am interested in does not have to do with the question of “real” or “fake”, nor is it one of “belief.” Such a question can only be answered on a case-by-case basis, of pursuing and listening to the narratives of the practitioners themselves, and a certain amount of faith in mystery and the unknown. It is a highly sensitive, highly subjective issue—naturally—as it is based in personal experience.

It is not my place to judge whether or not the spirits of the mother goddess pantheon actually possess the mediums during a ritual—whether the woman under the red veil is still that same woman, or the embodiment of a great war-lord or persnickety goddess. However, what I can do, and what I am better able to convey through my own research and upon building on the work of past scholars in the subject, is the criteria by which practitioners themselves judge the authenticity of a len dong ceremony. For practitioners, the art of authenticity is the art of performance. The visual aesthetic is essential to understanding len dong, and is directly related to the many tangible and intangible benefits that practitioners may receive from the spirits.

Background

In Vietnam there exists a unique subculture of religion of a more eclectic nature. It consists of pictures of frolicking cats with smiling faces, of altars with offerings of fruit and flowers, of the almost cult status of Ho Chi Minh himself, and of lucky lottery tickets sold on street corners and cafes. In Vietnam, the religious scene is dominated by the presence of fortune-telling, spirit possession, and mediumship related to Dao Man, mother goddess worship, and other popular religions. The rituals are bountiful and include spirit possession and exorcism. Hue City in particular is a vibrant area for religious studies. Though the days of the Nguyen Dynasty are gone, there
remains an echo of a powerful spiritual past, made all the more deafening and cacophonous in post-
*Doi Moi* era of a rapidly developing Vietnam.

Contemporary mediums remember the period after 1954, during the Communist Party’s anti-superstition campaign to eliminate folk practices like *len dong*, and speak of the difficulty in obtaining ritual items for their ceremonies. The popular religious climate from 1954 until *Doi Moi* is characterized by mediums as harsh and unforgiving. Material goods like votive paper offerings, amulets, and manikins essential to contemporary ceremonies were difficult to come by; craftsmen’s shops were often raided by the authorities, even their tools and raw materials were confiscated. In addition to a lack of material goods that comprise many of the gifts in spirit possession, essential elements to the ceremonial aesthetic were also policed: robes, veils, and the music itself. One interviewee of Endres’ and Larsson’s research recalls a ceremony without *chau van*, the ritual music of *len dong*—instead, conducting the rites in silence out of fear of being reported to the authorities by suspicious neighbors.

With the reorientation of the economy to a free market, there is an abundance of religious goods and services. Votive paper, bundles of multicolored incense sticks, lottery tickets, amulets, and herbal medicines are just some of the items that dominate a huge market dedicated solely to popular religion. Today, the Vietnamese government is appears to be lenient in its policies regarding spirit possession, but only with the exception that such ritual practices advance the party agenda of promoting nationalism. The government makes a distinction between the kinds of popular religions it considers acceptable; there remains a stigma against mediums and the ritual of spirit possession that is characteristic of *Tu Phu*.

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5 Viveca Larsson and Kirsten W. Endres. “Children of the Spirits, Followers of a Master”. P.158

6 Nguyen Thi Hien, “A Bit of Spirit Favor is Equal to a Load of Mundane Gifts”. P. 141
However, recent scholarship into another popular religious tradition, the cult of Saint Tran, sheds light on the ways in which *Tu Phu* has gained a small measure of legitimization and status\(^7\). Pham Quynh Phuong theorizes the gradual acceptance of spirit possession is due to its relationship with the Vietnamese war hero, Tran Hung Dao\(^8\). A symbol of the strength of Vietnamese character in a time of Mongolian and Chinese invasion, Tran Hung Dao is revered as a god in Vietnam. Tran Hung Dao is not the only historical figure that is held in high esteem—Vietnam has a tradition of naming streets after national heroes in its history; among them, the Trung Sisters (Hai Ba Trung), Ba Trieu, Pham Ngu Lao, and Le Loi.

Walking the streets of Sai Gon, Ha Noi, or Hue is akin to walking amongst a literal pantheon of historical figures turned mythological heroes that traverse the past, present, and future. By relating the goddess religion of *Tu Phu* as sharing a similar pantheon to the above national heroes, Phuong shows how the attitude of the Vietnamese government toward *Tu Phu* may be viewed as one of understanding the practice as cultural and historical heritage, as opposed to over-indulgent superstition\(^9\).

The issue of an overtly extravagant visual aesthetic is of great concern to the government. On one hand, it decries the lavishness of *len dong* ceremonies, as they can easily cost upwards of 2,000 USD, yet just this past February 23 the government sponsored a rather sumptuous public *len

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7. The cult of Saint Tran is not the focus of my paper, but acknowledging the relationship between the two religions is helpful in attempting to understand the societal and political attitudes toward *Tu Phu* as it stands alone.

8. Pham Quynh Phuong, "Tran Hung Dao." p. 31-54

9. Personal conversations I've had with individuals express that the government is rather ambiguous in its policies regarding *len dong*. Some express that the government is just concerned with practitioners wasting money on the ceremonies, but not necessarily in the content of the religion, i.e. that it is superstition.
dong ceremony in Ha Noi\textsuperscript{10}. Here, the issue of authenticity as I defined it earlier is clear: is len dong meant as pure performance or is there religious brevity that must be observed? What constitutes a proper len dong ceremony?

Research suggests that there must be a balance struck between performance, entertainment, and solemnity. The ceremony performed in Ha Noi was performance-art oriented. There was more of an emphasis on the entertainment factor, not so much the critical “religiousness” of len dong in bringing gifts and blessings to practitioners. In one news article written on the public event, there is mention of a medium that pierces his cheeks with metal rods, along with photographs of the individual\textsuperscript{11}. Surely the feat is meant to be astonishing, piquing the curiosity of the audience and bringing a sense of wonder. Ngo Duc Thinh, a historian of popular religions such as Tu Phu, valued the ceremony as showcasing the unique cultures of ethnic minorities in Vietnam\textsuperscript{12}. As a sort of history lesson to its people, the possession ceremony held in February was meant to bring awareness and understanding to a practice so ridiculed and feared.

Of course, the visual aesthetic was highly emphasized—and can be seen in the intricacy of the costumes, the form of the performers’ bodies, the size and skill of the orchestra, and the many decorations of the performance space. A visually beautiful ceremony is appreciated by the spirits and practitioners, and can be considered a sign of a medium’s devotion and status. But style certainly does not prevail over substance. The government’s focus on the performance art aspects of the len dong ritual in Ha Noi makes the practice acceptable to endorse, deflecting attention from the


\textsuperscript{11} “Hanoi holds public séance; serious on shamanism,” Vietnews: Eyes on Vietnam. Feb 26, 2011

\textsuperscript{12} “Hanoi holds public séance; serious on shamanism,” Vietnews: Eyes on Vietnam. Feb 26, 2011
perceived darker, more problematic religious content—specifically, the popularly asked questions “Is it real?”, “Is it evil/black magic?”.

In addition, focusing on len dong as simply cultural heritage in need of preservation discourages a deeper analysis of what actually occurs during possession, what the function the ritual plays in the lives of practitioners, and what larger narrative it is a part of. Again, stressing the ritual’s relationship to nationalism and Vietnamese history removes one from really looking at the particulars of the ritual. It becomes seen as performance, a history lesson, a lived expression of the history of the Vietnamese. To a certain extent that is helpful, but as this paper will indeed show, there is more to len dong than simply “looking pretty”. Len dong is a highly controversial act, not just for outsiders viewing the ritual, but amongst the mediums themselves as there is much debate over proper performance technique and decorum.

The Research Methodology and Purpose

The so-called “superstition” surrounding possession that the government wishes to avoid is what this paper will seek to explore and share by way of photographs, recordings, interviews, and personal narratives. It is the murky, more difficult though incredibly interesting topic of the healing benefits, of tangible and intangible gifts, and of the transformation of lives through len dong that I will analyze in following pages. My paper is divided into several parts, each exploring the question, how does len dong function in the lives of practitioners? I will focus on the intangible and tangible gifts, or loc, and the transformative powers of Tu Phu, how individuals are called to mediumship and the essential criteria that make a “good” medium.

The purpose of focusing on len dong as lived religion is important in understanding it as a tool for sustaining various relationships with and communities of the living, the dead, the natural, and the supernatural. Spirit possession lives because it is embodied in mediums that perform the
mythologies and engage in a kind of personal and communal therapy. Spirit possession lives because it must adapt along with the people, according to changing environments and is thus, a response to and a commentary on social, political, economic, and cultural change in Vietnam.
The Interviews:

1. “My Mind is Unstable”: De’s Story

2. De’s Father: Yin Illness and Len Dong

3. De’s Mother: Feeding the Spirits

4. Superstition: The Government’s Opinion of Len Dong

5. Patron to the Spirits: The Blessed Fortune of Mr. Loc

6. Ms. Mai’s Grandmother: a Great Heart, a Great Healer

7. Possession by the Spirits: Master Tri’s Story

8. The Question of De: Escaping the Spirits?

The above interviews took place during the Independent Study Period (ISP) of 4/21/2011 through 5/19/2011. They were conducted in Hue City, in Central Vietnam, and are to be considered formal interviews. This work, however, is supplemented with informal interviews of individuals.
1. **“My Mind is Unstable”: De’s Story**

   De is a very studious and hardworking individual—so much so that he suffers from insomnia and has trouble remaining in deep sleep. He is committed to practicing and learning the English language, as well as politics, history, and the culture of Vietnam. He is very proud of his achievements, and of his character. He often tells me, “I may have nothing, but I have all things”, to shed light on the struggles of his day-to-day life. Though the environment, he says, isn’t the best for his education, he still achieves and is successful.

   De rents a room with his elder sister in the center of Hue City. He is only a three minute walk from his university. He tells me that his lifestyle is very monotonous since becoming a senior—he’s always studying in the library, going to school, or staying at home. De prefers to spend his time practicing English with the foreigners he meets in Hue. He jokes that he “kidnaps” them to hang out, have coffee, and learn about different cultures. Oftentimes, he stays out with his foreign friends until late in the evening, which worries his older sister who scolds him for it. De says he is only out so that he can study and practice with his friends, while his sister thinks he is just out “wasting time”.

   His mother and father make small means to support themselves; De receives an allowance from his older sister, a nurse. Since she makes a good income she can afford to send money to help their parents. Their parents work in the service of a woman, Ms. Hong, who performs *len dong*. The mother is the lead cook who prepares the menu and the appropriate food for the rituals. The father maintains and cares for the community temple and Ms. Hong’s private ritual sites. He is also her ceremonial assistant. One year ago, De himself was possessed:
“I felt my head spin around, I could not control my body. I could feel that a soul was inside me. There was a battle between my mind and the soul that penetrated me. My mother was worried because I would move around a lot; I would get very tired, but I just kept moving.”

De’s mother went to a fortune-teller to ask for help and to figure out what was happening to her son. Fortune-teller divined that she saw De’s grandfather’s soul inside of him. His grandfather was the spirit that possessed him, making him do the strenuous movements that would cause total exhaustion. The mother and her neighbors prayed so that the soul of the grandfather would leave De and let him rest. That’s when De said a len dong ceremony was performed and he got better. The soul of his grandfather left him. De has never forgotten that experience and says that non-believers would think he is crazy,

“Many people do not believe until it happens to them. Then they believe. I don’t believe everything in len dong, but I believe it has the power to heal. I believe what happened to me.”

De said that he was chosen by the soul of his grandfather because he was the eldest grandson, the closest in line to that ancestor. After De’s recovery, he later learned that a cousin of his was also possessed by the same grandfather. The same affliction happened to her; she could not control her body. She would speak, but no one could understand the things she said. Later, De relates another story to me, revealing that possession of him by his grandfather was a reoccurring event in his life:

Because De would often stay out late with foreign friends to practice English, his older sister would yell at him. One day as the two visited a fortune-teller, they encountered the soul of their grandfather who possessed the fortune-teller. In the middle of the story De pauses, shivers, and rubs his arms. I ask what is the matter and he tells me he still thinks about that day, and doesn’t know how the fortune-teller could know the information she told them. The fortune-teller spoke as the grandfather—berating the grand-daughter for always yelling at De when he would come home late.
Their grandfather said to stop yelling at De because he was only going out to study and to learn more; he was not staying out to waste time or to simply have fun.

De didn’t know how the fortune-teller knew about the fighting between him and his sister. He said that at most, their mother knew—because they talked to her. But other than that, how could the fortune-teller know about the events occurring between the siblings? This was more proof to De in the power of mediumship—no one could explain why or how she knew those intimate details of De’s character, and the situation he was in with his sister. For De, his grandfather really had traversed the spirit world to communicate with him and his sister.

2. **De’s Father: Yin Illness and Len Dong**

About three years ago, De’s father became deathly ill. “He was very skinny and would vomit,” said De. His father had been sick ever since De could remember, “He was always coughing, and sometimes he would cough blood.” His mother got very worried about his father’s health. At one point, she sought out a fortune-teller to determine ailed him.

According to the fortune-teller, the grandfather of her husband was unsatisfied with the position of his tomb. The fortune-teller told her to change the direction of the tomb. If she did so according to the requirements of the grandfather, her husband would return to his health. Soon afterward, the family constructed a new grave and changed the direction so that it would be suitable for the ancestors. After creating the new tomb and praying to the ancestors De’s father regained his health. The grandfather had been uncomfortable with the position of the tomb; De explained to me that in Vietnamese culture there is a belief in life after death. He could not specify that it was a place, but it was a kind of afterlife where the dead carry on. Since his grandfather was uncomfortable in the afterlife, he was communicating to his family his wishes.
De had witnessed the return to health of his father, and because of that, believes in the power of mediumship to heal the afflicted. He can only speak for his experience, and told me that not many people believe it because it is “superstitious”. His father now serves the spirits of the mother goddess religion, as an assistant to a woman who performs spirit possession. Since making that change in his life, De says that his father is healthier and happier. His father’s chronic cough has miraculously disappeared.

**Analysis and Commentary:**

De confirms with me the concept of Yin and Yang illness: Yang illnesses are associated with physical illness, the kind that doctors can treat. Yin illness, in contrast, are supernatural illnesses that only be treated with the help of a master medium.13 De said that when he was possessed, his mother took him to the doctor, but the doctor could not figure out what was wrong with him. In fact, he told her that De was normal. De, though, knew that the things happening to him were not normal. Only the guidance of a spiritual doctor, in this case, a medium, could lead De to recover his health. Yin illnesses are characterized as mental, emotional, spiritual afflictions brought on through inexplicable means—they are the cause of the spirits of the after-life.

De and his father are two examples of individuals who are plagued by Yin sickness who, through participation in *len dong*, recover their health. Their stories fit a reoccurring pattern that Endres, Fjelstad, Nguyen, and others describe in their own ethnographic accounts of healing through *len dong*. An individual is overcome with a sudden illness or strange behavior, oftentimes, the

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individual has had a history of illness that comes to a climax. After meeting with a medium and performing the proper rituals and prayers to the spirits, and often, upon initiation as a medium in *Tu Phu*, individuals recover. Nguyen describes this pattern as a “mythic model” unique to ethnic Viet culture. According to Nguyen’s analysis, Yin illness and its treatment through ritual practices and initiation in *Tu Phu* is a legitimate method of dealing with the supernatural and natural worlds, of presenting solutions to “personal human problems”\(^{14}\).

An analysis of a system of parallel worlds of the living and dead shows that Yin illnesses are not as mysterious as one would believe. Within this spiritual belief system, the two worlds are in constant contact with each other. Mediums, “chosen” individuals”, and those with a “sixth sense”, considered very special in this Vietnamese context, are the conduits through which the two realms communicate. De’s mother explains the relationship between the worlds of the living and dead in her story below. A more in-depth analysis of her explanation will follow.

### 3. De’s Mother: Feeding the Spirits

The story of how De’s mother came to *Tu Phu* is different from his father’s, but still fits the narrative of how people get involved with the religion. De’s mother is the owner of a catering service an hour outside of Hue City. Prior to this job, she owned a small business selling various products. One day, De’s mother found that many of her products had gone missing. She believed that another woman in the neighborhood had stolen them from her, but she could not prove it. The situation cost De’s mother nearly all of her money trying to take her case to court; she faced serious financial ruin. At the same time, her husband went through a bout of sickness that left him debilitated.

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De recalls one evening,

“I was sleeping and suddenly I woke up to the sound of my mother’s voice. I went outside and saw her pacing the yard. She was talking, but I knew they weren’t her words. She started speaking to me, and the voice told me to study hard in order to help my mother. After that, she would have dreams where voices spoke to her.”

De’s mother also sought the help of a medium—

“She went to the woman and was told that she was chosen.”

De’s mother explains the concept of *co can*, to be chosen:

“There are two worlds, the living and the dead. They are parallel worlds. A spirit or soul targets a living person, usually someone who has a sixth sense. The dead choose that person to communicate with. They send that person premonitions and make them do certain actions or say certain words.

Sometimes the person shares a trait of the spirit or soul; they may have the same likes and dislikes, or resemblance in appearance and demeanor. I was not scared when I was chosen; I wanted to take the responsibility.”

It was afterward that De’s mother was initiated in *Tu Phu*, and hired by Ms. Hong to be her ceremonial cook. De’s mother is an attentive and hard-working cook. She knows all of the traditional recipes for *len dong*, and prepares the pork, sticky rice, and sweet soup—the essential offerings in any ceremony. At the celebration to commemorate the initiation of a new temple to a water goddess of *Tu Phu*, De’s mother and a group of seven women successfully cooked for the
100+ people who arrived over the course of the morning and late afternoon—in addition to preparing the ritual offerings of food for the many altars in the temple.

De’s mother cooks for Ms. Hong’s *len dong* ceremonies every year, gaining many clients through it. At the ceremony I attended, she placed her business cards on each table. De tells me that her catering business runs very well, and that though times are still hard, she and her husband are much better off.

**Analysis and Commentary:**

De’s mother faces financial ruin and controversy regarding her business. Unable to prove the theft of her goods, she is frustrated; facing difficulty in supporting her family, she is on the brink of despair. De’s mother comes to *Tu Phu* because she believes it was her destiny. As a response to the hardship in her life, undergoing initiation in *Tu Phu* allowed for her to gain a sense of control and meaning in an otherwise chaotic situation. De says that when his mother, possessed by spirits, spoke to him, he was told to work hard in school to help his mother. Given his mother’s explanation of parallel worlds, one can see how spirits intervened to help her and her family.

De’s mother had been chosen by the spirits, as she later expresses reoccurring instances of possession, and uncontrollable physical and mental afflictions throughout her life. In addition, her initiation into *Tu Phu* coincided with the extreme sickness of her husband, who later initiates into the religion. It would seem that that De’s family was indeed receiving signs—so much so, that they were coming to an unavoidable climax.

The situation of De’s mother is one of returning prosperity after financial collapse, however, note that it is drastically different in the size and scope of a later story—that of Mr. Loc. It is advisable not to compare the two as a matter of one being more lucky or successful or favored by
the spirits. They are separate situations unique to each individual, yet both share the mythic model of supernatural illness, bad luck, intervention of a medium and later initiation with tangible and intangible gifts from the spirits. Again, the focus of this narrative is to explore how the life of De’s mother had changed through service in Tu Phu. It is the transformative power of *len dong* that is the focus.

4. **Superstition: the Government’s Opinion of *Len Dong***

“Hue people are very superstitious,” De tells me.

“They believe in *len dong* and mediumship and fortune-tellers.” When asked about the government’s position on such practices, he says, “It is not illegal. The government does not encourage it, but it also does not prevent it.” De explains that the government cannot take action against popular rituals such as spirit possession because it is considered an important part of Vietnamese culture. “It has a history in Vietnam. It is a part of every Vietnamese person so the government cannot take it away.” De explains that spirit possession is a part of Vietnamese culture and history, Thus it has to be acknowledged. However, the government does have a policy on superstitions that are classified as “too superstitious”. I asked for elaboration,

“If they do something crazy—if it hurts people instead of helps people; or, if the ceremony is too expensive… The government thinks it’s a waste of money if a ceremony is too expensive. The money could be used for more practical things.”

I asked if more money spent on a *len dong* ritual meant that it was more real, or authentic,

“That is not the case—some people charge too much money. They take advantage of the people who really seriously believe in *len dong*. Of course, it costs money to perform the ceremony, but there is a normal cost.”
Master Tri, the president of a local organization dedicated to the preservation of Dao Mau (Mother goddess religions) like Tu Phu also speaks to authenticity and legitimacy issues that De mentioned above:

“During the Vietnam war period Dao Mau existed. In 1974, the main Association of Thien Tien Thanh Mau (Thien: Heaven, Tien: Fairy; Thanh Mau: Holy Mother) in the entire south of Vietnam was established. This association had regulation, systems of teaching, legal status but Dao Mau is not an official religion in the country because, it's not true according to scientific evidence, you know? And some people have taken use of the religion to cheat others…”

Master Tri relates a story of a government official’s experience with Tu Phu:

“The former secretary of the Vietnam Communist Party died because of the gun of an American soldier. For a long time, the State and the relatives couldn’t find his body. One day, his family visited a medium, who said she could help find the lost body.

This woman was reliable because of her contribution to the State in finding the lost bodies of Vietnamese soldiers. His nephew, the secretary of the Communist Party of Ha Tinh province, didn’t believe.

The dead man came to the nephew in a dream. Three years later, the dead soul penetrated directly into his body. As a result, he believed, and finally the body was found.

Today, Vietnamese government supports the use of mediums for finding Vietnamese lost to the war time.”
Based on De and Master Tri’s explanations, one finds that there is a possibility of exploitation in *len dong*. According to De, because people are superstitious, and since for the most part, *len dong* does provide real benefits in their lives, there is a trend for some mediums to overcharge for their services. The reason why some practitioners would still seek the services of an expensive medium is that they believe they will get more spiritual favor.

Master Tri’s story reveals the complexity of the relationship between *Tu Phu* and the government. The government appears to believe whole-heartedly in the ability of mediums in *Tu Phu* to re-locate Vietnamese bodies lost during the wars. Their issue is not with the substance of the religion, but with the style: the aesthetic. The aesthetic, the ritual, is what costs money—and what is often made the focus of attention at the expense of its function.

The story that Master Tri shares is, at its core, a sorrowful one. Respect and love of family, a search for reuniting broken families, of making peace with the dead, is the substance discovered upon a deeper analysis. One sees a crucial function of mediumship as that of bridging the worlds of the living and dead, of communicating between the living and dead—to ultimately find peace, reconciliation, and unity. This in itself is a critically intangible gift that *Tu Phu* brings: the gift of family, of reunion.

The mythic model of *Tu Phu* is a response to changes in Vietnam, and particularly, a method of coping with the country’s tragic history. People are in search of their lost loved ones, of bringing peace to their families, of recovering and thriving. Once again, one sees mediumship, then as an essential practice because it allows for the communication of the living with the dead and vice versa.
5. Patron to the Spirits: The Blessed Fortune of Mr. Loc

De’s mother is not the only example of someone who successfully returned from the brink of financial ruin through initiation in *Tu Phu*. Mr. Loc\textsuperscript{15} is considered a billionaire in Vietnam. He travels from Ha Noi to Hue for every *len dong* ceremony held by his friend, the medium, Ms. Hong. Like De’s mother, his business collapsed. By circumstance, Mr. Loc befriended Ms. Hong. After becoming initiated in *Tu Phu*, he began another business and became highly successful. The night before the ceremony, Mr. Loc spoke with me and showed me his wallet. He took out a one inch stack of 500,000 VND, in addition to a stack of 100 USD bills.

For the transformation of his life’s situation, Mr. Loc is an initiate of *Tu Phu* and dedicates himself to the spirits by sponsoring Ms. Hong’s ceremonies. The temple in which that particular ceremony took place was funded in large part by Mr. Loc. His responsibility to the spirits includes ensuring that there are enough ritual materials for the ceremony to take place—and many of the materials are bountiful and beautiful.

The pre-ceremonial preparations includes rows and rows of magenta-hued dragon fruit, milk apples, green mangos, pears, bananas, and grapefruit cleaned and organized on the temple floor; enormous bundles of fresh blooming flowers; fourteen sacrificial roosters—the next morning awakens to an almost never-ending parade of even more ritual goods. There are five large suckling pigs on display, platters of sticky rice and sweet beans, mountains of sweet potatoes and taro roots, sparkling votive paper altars, and elaborate paper manikins.

During the ceremony, all of the items are blessed by the mediums under the charge of the spirits and are redistributed to everyone present at the ceremony. Gifts of mangos, cabbages, carrots, milk apples, and yams are pushed into awaiting hands—crisp 1,000 VND bills are handed, one-by-

\textsuperscript{15} A nickname; “gift”, representative of his personal story with *Tu Phu*
one, to each participant. Everyone walks away with a blessing, but some blessings appear to be
greater than others. Of the stacks of Vietnamese dong distributed to the participants, the larger bills
are reserved for the ceremonial assistants, the musicians, and the camera man who is recording the
event. These individuals are the ones who receive the baby blue 500,000 VND bills, pink 200,000
VND bills, and the mint green 100,000 VND bills. Perhaps it is because their services are considered
extremely vital to the ceremony, that they receive such gifts.

Regardless of how much money one walks away with, the meaning of such gifts is much
deeper than their surface value. Loc, the ceremonial gifts blessed with the favor of the spirits, are
extremely coveted. They are seen as good luck charms—amulets of protection, even. It is only
during the len dong ceremony that the paper money, fruit, and other items are considered sacred. And
even then, one must pay attention to the point in time in which the mundane object is lifted into the
realm of the sacred. The medium, as he or she is possessed, must touch the items in order for them
to be filled with blessings. Prior to any interaction with the spirits, via a medium, the items are
considered ordinary. Thus, the role of the medium as conduit between the parallel worlds of the
living and dead is clear. The medium is the physical link between the two worlds; in loc, these worlds
meet.

Throughout the seven-hour ceremony, Mr. Loc can be seen smiling and looking very
pleased. Mr. Loc is certainly something of a celebrity, as dozens of people approach him to shake his
hand and exchange kind words. At lunch, he sits at a table with important men and women from the
local Tu Phu organization\textsuperscript{16}. They drink beer and share the food prepared by De’s mother. De again
tells me that just a few years ago Mr. Loc was destitute—now, he is rich and successful.

\textbf{Analysis and Commentary:}

\textsuperscript{16} Again, there is no formal institution that represents Tu Phu in Viet Nam, the organization mentioned in this paper is a
local one that represents the religion as it is practiced in that particular province.
The tangible gifts, as related in this story, are obvious—gifts of money, fruit, and food. The intangible gifts, though, are a bit more difficult to understand. One wants to know all of the particulars, but pursuit of such questions results in vague answers. Perhaps the individuals themselves do not know how to explain the good fortune brought upon Mr. Loc. Exactly how long ago did Mr. Loc fall into bankruptcy, what kind of business was he involved in, how did he come to meet Ms. Hong, what was the event that proved to him serving the spirits of *len dong* actually worked? All these questions, and more, could be asked and one still would not receive a satisfying answer. What we know is that somehow Mr. Loc’s life had been transformed dramatically, by way of the spirits of *Tu Phu*.

Mr. Loc is required to serve the spirits until the day he dies. He must never forget his responsibility to them. As patron to the spirits, provider of funds to the *len dong* ceremonies, Mr. Loc plays an integral role in existence of the ceremony itself. He is also a key player in creating the visual aesthetic of the *len dong* ceremony. Because of the money he provided, the ceremony I attended was considered particularly beautiful. Nothing but the best was served, offered, eaten, and shared. Even the fruit itself was unblemished and firm. The altars had been meticulously cleaned the night before; cups of incense ash were washed and filled with sand and fresh new sticks. The cleanliness of the temple was of great importance.

A clean temple, filled with the bounty of gifts, flowers, food, music, and costume the next morning, contributed to an atmosphere of pleasure—one that would facilitate the invitation of the spirits among the people. The ceremony witnessed was judged successful, given the amount of gifts distributed to the participants, the number of spirits who came to possess the mediums, and the arrival of the goddess of that particular temple herself. The general feelings of excitement and happiness in the participants were also clues that the ceremony was successful.
6. Ms. Mai’s Grandmother: a Great Heart, a Great Healer

Mai’s grandmother is an extremely warm individual—she is eager to clasp my hand in hers, firing off in Vietnamese and laughing at me because I can’t understand her. Her name is Mrs. Thanh, and she has bouncy curly hair that frames her grinning face. Her eyes are especially bright; she seems younger than she really is. At 64 years old, she has been practicing _len dong_ for over 40 years:

“I was 19 years old. I had been very sick, I had gone crazy, and would always hurt myself. The fortune-teller told me to pray to the spirits. I got better. If you do _len dong_, you get good things. Lots of women in Hue do _len dong_. It makes sickness and accidents disappear. I pray for success and good health for everybody.

I make two ceremonies every year. I have to. If I don’t, then I am not successful, I get bad luck. I have to do it for the rest of my life. I like when the wrap covers my head; my mind changes. Twenty spirits come to me, from high to low, in order.

It has made me happier, healthier. To become a medium, it depends on karma—like Buddhism. If you are helpful, loving, and do not hurt others, then you can become a medium. If you are bad, you cannot become a medium. It also depends on destiny. You must have a sixth sense. You must have a big heart. If somebody in my family is sick, I help. If someone suddenly becomes crazy, I have to find the reason.”

A friend of Mrs. Thanh comes upstairs to the room where we are speaking; she interrupts in order to exchange lottery tickets with her. While Mrs. Thanh busies herself with the tickets and counting sheets of money, Mai tells me about her grandmother’s ceremonies:
“When I was a child I always watched her do *len dong*. I liked to watch, but it was so boring. The music is really boring. I can’t understand what they’re saying! The music is very traditional…”

When Mrs. Thanh finishes with the lottery tickets, she shows me the altars devoted to her *len dong* ceremonies. Her husband comes upstairs and flicks a light switch next to the altar. The string of Christmas lights all around the altar begin to blink off and on. She allows me to take photographs of the altar, and then takes me outside to the balcony, where the possessions take place. It is a small cramped area decorated with altars, incense sticks, and colorful flowers. She invites me back to her house to eat *bun bo hue* and before I leave, she introduces me to her card-playing friends in the downstairs kitchen. She asks me to photograph her and her friends, as well as her baby grandson, and asks that I send her the photos.

**Analysis and Commentary**

The story of how Mrs. Thanh came to mediumship is, again, much like the ones related earlier in this paper. Like De and his family, she experiences some kind of physical and mental illness. She physically harms herself—not out of her own volition—but because she cannot control her actions. Like De’s mother, Mai’s grandmother also tells us that she was chosen, as she had a “sixth sense.” She had already possessed a disposition favorable to receiving the spirits, though they manifested themselves in ways that would torment her. Through initiation in *Tu Phu*, Mrs. Thanh becomes a medium. And, through the dedicated service to the spirits, Thanh experiences a happier healthier lifestyle.

Part of Thanh’s service, though, is not just to the spirits—but those all those around her in need of spiritual guidance. In her role as a medium, she serves not only as an intermediary between
the living and the dead, but as well as a community healer. Her heart is big, and she is earnest and
genuine as she tells her story of why *len dong* is important to her.

Like De’s mother, Mrs. Thanh expresses her love of the spirits—most importantly, how she
is unafraid of them. She welcomes them and even enjoys the moment of possession. As she gives
me a tour of the ceremonial area of her house, I can see how intimate the quarters are. How, when
filled with people, out of sheer numbers, one really does feel part of a group, a community, a family.

Given Mrs. Thanh’s disposition, she certainly facilitates in creating a feeling of group unity. As she
introduces me to her friends, the women and men playing cards in her kitchen, she is quick to have
me sit with them. She wants me to take photographs of them playing, so that she might have the
memories of their time together. The camera itself is given the most attention, as the ladies laugh at
the faces they make, or how their one male friend refuses to smile in his photos. Based on my
experience with Mrs. Thanh, I get a glimpse of a facet of this woman’s personality, how she came to
Tu Phu, and how she may indeed have been chosen to help her loved ones and those around her.

Mrs. Thanh’s story also evokes a reoccurring theme that De’s mother spoke of earlier:
destiny. Like De’s mother, Mrs. Thanh is unafraid to work in service of the spirits. She views it as a
great honor, and as a profession that brings her and her community good health and good luck.

Endres cites Nguyen Thi Hien as noting that initiation into *Tu Phu* often coincides with critical
moments of a person’s life. In the stories of De’s mother and father; Mr. Loc; and Mrs. Thanh it is
clear that their initiation into *Tu Phu* does indeed fit the theoretical reasoning above. Each
experiences intense financial failure, or a serious bout of illness.

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Again—it is not of their own free will that they are initiated, but they have been chosen by the spirits. Serving the spirits brings good fortune and health, as well as status—like in the case of the well-known Ms. Hong—however, the stipulation is that initiates must serve for the rest of their lives. Endres helps us to better understand such a relationship by using the idea of owing a debt. In their past lives, perhaps Mrs. Thanh, Mrs. Hong, De and his family, and Mr. Loc owed something to the spirits. Over the course of generations the spiritual debt caught up with each of them, demanding satisfaction.

7. Possession by the Spirits: Master Tri’s Story

A question begging to be answered is, “What does spirit possession feel like?” Mrs. Thanh, in the above story, spoke of her great enjoyment of possession and how she liked the feeling. Master Tri, the president of the Association of Holy Mother Religion of Central Vietnam, speaks about his own experience with possession by the spirits:

“I always feel healthier, I am, after all, quite handsome in my old age, don’t you think? When a person does len dong he can control himself about 30% of the time. If you cannot completely control yourself, you can go insane. The five elements (metal, wood, water, fire, earth) in your body will become chaotic. During possession, I usually know what is happening to me, but I cannot fully control it. Sometimes, a spirit is very “heavy”, then I don’t know what I’m doing and it is more difficult to have control.

I ask Master Tri how he came to len dong,

“My grandfather was a medium, so, I had to become a medium. My father did not know anything about len dong, He was not chosen. I, however, was. When I was 12 years old, my

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grandfather died and because my father did not know how to do len dong, no one was able to teach me.

My mother and father did not believe in the religion. I would get sick, very sick, but no medicine or doctors could help me. I went to the hospital, but they could not treat me. Finally, my mother visited a medium to find out what was wrong with me. The medium divined that I was chosen by a high official in Tu Phu. She said it was a good sign and that the spirit could help me. After that, I prayed to the official spirit for three days and three nights. When finished, I got better—even healthier than before! Today, I am still very healthy. I am also very happy.”

I ask if anyone else in his family was chosen for initiation in Tu Phu,

“Only one of my sons is an initiate. He lives with me and helps take care of the temples. My other sons are married and live in Canada. I don’t think they believe.”

Master Tri’s experience again fits the pattern established earlier in the above personal narratives: an incurable sickness followed by consultation with the spirits, and ultimately, initiation in Tu Phu. Master Tri speaks of having some amount of mental and physical control over himself during the possession ritual. He is conscious of the fact that the spirits enter his body, but they are the ones with the most control.

During the possession ceremony I attended, I was fortunate enough to watch Master Tri conduct the len dong ritual. Moments of possession occurred whenever he would pick up a red veil and place it upon his head. The conclusion of a possession occurred with the slowing-down of the ritual movements, a signal with hand gestures, and the removal of the veil. During possession,
Master Tri appeared as a different person, in costume, and in countenance. In his performances, he is in complete concentration, his movements energetic yet restrained. His face is stern.

**Analysis and Commentary:**

In comparison with Ms. Hong and other mediums that performed during the possession ceremony, his style is quite different. Each medium has a unique method of expression in terms of their dance and how they choose to represent each spirit as they enter their bodies. Thus, the emergence of the performance aesthetic: each medium performs uniquely. There is a certain style to each individual; No two mediums perform in the same way. In fact, no two mediums share the same understanding of *len dong* and *Tu Phu*.

This does not mean that *Tu Phu* is a fractured religion with sects vying for legitimacy and recognition. What I mean is *Tu Phu* is as highly individualistic as it is highly pluralistic. *Tu Phu* is perhaps one of the most democratic of institutions—nowhere is this seen than in the ritual of *len dong*. All at once there are varying styles, and to a certain extent, a degree to which *len dong* rituals must conform to in terms of a pleasant visual aesthetic, in addition to the unchanging foundation of belief, function, and meaning. As the religion is practiced and led by people, for people, and created out of the drama that is human existence—naturally, it is subject to change, to fit the context of a particular period.

8. **The Question of De: Escaping the Spirits?**

It may seem that the one mystery in all of this is De himself. De is not initiated in *Tu Phu*, yet he does participate in ceremonial preparations. During the April 29th ceremony, De helped clean the temple; set up chairs, tables, and altars; and assisted in cooking the food. What one must realize is the degree to which he was involved. De did not assist in the *len dong* ritual itself. What he did was
more “behind the scenes” in ensuring the ceremony could be conducted. The actual performers in
the len dong ritual consisted of only the mediums, the assistants to the mediums, and the musicians.
These three entities, besides the spirits, are the main players of the ritual. What then, may explain the
De’s story? Given the framework we have explored as to why certain individuals are called to
initiation, De seems to have escaped it.

Larsson and Endres’ research mentions that destined mediums have the chance to defer
their initiation through a ritual\textsuperscript{19}. Unfortunately, it is not specified whether the individual must
initiate at a later date. It is not clear in De’s circumstance whether or not he was considered chosen
by the spirits, or if there was a ritual performed in order to prevent his initiation. According to his
story, he was indeed chosen—and had exhibited the behavior and other relevant signs. Yet, De
remains outside of Tu Phu. His reasons? He simply does not want to serve the spirits.

De’s refusal is not uncommon. While initiation in Tu Phu is seen as a great thing, and many
of its adherents speak of an overall positive transformation of their lives, the great cost of
performing len dong is enough to drive some would be followers away. Some individuals cannot
afford the cost of len dong rituals—especially since in recent years the emphasis on bigger more
elaborate ceremonies has seemed to raise the bar on what may be considered an appropriate
worship. Again, there is a concern that the substance of the religion, the solemnity, and decorum of
the rituals may come second to flashiness and performance. And those poor individuals who desire
to serve the spirits may find themselves in a panic over how to finance the kind of ceremony they
envision of performing as grander ceremonies seem to become the norm.

Master Duong, a medium in Larsson and Endres’ essay fumes, “Many people think that
nowadays they just have to len dong and they will have a lot of money, right?” and Master Canh, also

\textsuperscript{19} Larsson and Endres, “Children of the Spirits, Followers of a Master.” p. 145
expresses his disapproval of the competition between mediums to have the best ceremony, “It all depends on the heart [tam] of the medium. I never assess a ritual according to the amount spent.”

Master Canh goes on to stress that the amount spent on rituals must adapt to the particular medium’s economic situation. Thus, a “plain” ceremony can still be beautiful to the spirits and followers if the medium has plenty of tam, and if the performance skills of the medium are especially impressive.

Perhaps these economic reasons must also be considered in regard to De’s refusal to serve in Tu Phu. While affordability surely isn’t the main reason as to why a person would not want to initiate as a medium, it does lend greater insight into the politics of mediumship and the problems of aesthetics, meaning, ability, and talent within the religion.

**Conclusion: False Dichotomies of Substance vs. Style**

Throughout the interviews within this paper, the question of substance and style appears very frequently. What is the really “religious” about the len dong ritual? Is the visual aesthetic emphasized at the expense of the meaning behind the ritual? I hope to have shared, by way of the candid stories of personal experience the real “meat” of the religion—its function, its purpose, how it transforms the lives of individuals. However, one cannot deny the importance of style—of performance, art, and presentation. What makes popular religion in Vietnam, and elsewhere for that matter, so unique is its fluidity. It has the ability to morph to the needs, concerns, and desires of the people as they arise.

Popular religion escapes antiquity, yet straddles the intersecting lines of the past, present, and future. Len dong expresses this quality. Len dong bridges generations of families, of living and dead, past and present, creates a path that leads to the future, yet always acknowledges its roots. Mediums

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and participants in *Tu Phu* take pride in their religion—nothing but the best must be given to the spirits, and ultimately, to each other. A beautiful ceremony is certainly important, as the deeper more elusive meaning behind it. Ritual performance itself can be the substance. There does not have to be division between the two spheres.

When one experiences the *len dong* ceremony, when one observes, eats, tastes, smells, hears, that individual becomes part of the fabric of the religion and of the mystery that takes place. One cannot step outside of the situation, for the situation is all around. It transcends ethnicity, geography, a shared political history, and draws forth what is human: love, fear, desire, nostalgia, pain.

*Len dong* emerges as a response to tragedy, to loss, to war—championing the persistence of the human spirit. It is manifested in the brilliant phoenix embroidered on the back of a medium’s robe, the gentle and precise footwork of a medium’s dance, the camaraderie shared over ritual meals of roast pork, sticky rice, and fresh vegetables. As much as *len dong* is a serious event, it is also an entertaining and light-hearted event. It brings happiness and joy; it brings the chance to communicate well wishes, to ask questions, to find solace. *Len dong* is itself, a gift.
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